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His Works, My History

Robert Fan Designed Magnificent Buildings. Then Mao Came Along.

 By [Maureen Fan](#)

 Washington Post Foreign Service
Wednesday, May 27, 2009

SHANGHAI -- I am standing at a desk in the Xuhui District Housing Bureau with a photograph of an old document, in search of my past. Two middle-aged bureaucrats sit behind desks, one scowling and the other eating a takeout lunch with chopsticks.

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"We'd like to know what the procedure is for getting back the house that belonged to her grandfather," my interpreter tells them. I look just like them, and for a moment they can't understand why someone else is speaking for me. But the Chinese my mother taught me was Cantonese, which turns out to be the wrong Chinese.

After some prodding, the scowling man pulls out a weathered ledger that says a real estate agent named Zhang controlled the property after 1958, authorizing the government to rent it out.

When I insist that my father and uncle know no such person, and that the family couldn't have rented out the house in the 1950s, the bureaucrat grows irritated, telling me there was "no corruption" back then.

"What do you know?" he says coolly. "You're only the third generation."

* * *

The history of a country changes, but often the buildings do not. They continue to stand, mute witnesses to the narrative around them. Those who

VIDEO



Searching for Family History in Modern Shanghai

The Washington Post's Maureen Fan went to homes designed by her grandfather, architect Fan Wenzhao, or Robert Fan, who left Shanghai when the Communists took over in 1949.

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control them, manage them or live in them fill them with meaning, and that's what they stand for, until history changes again and they represent something else.

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I come from a family of architects, and so the buildings matter to us. My grandfather was one of the most prominent architects in Shanghai, and designed the Nanking Theater, now the Shanghai Concert Hall; the Rialto, Astor and Majestic movie theaters; the YMCA building on Xizhang Road South; numerous university buildings and private residences; and the Railway and Health ministries in the southern city of Nanjing. But the buildings that drew me most were the ones my family once lived in.

In particular, I kept returning to the house at 1292 Huaihai Rd., the last house my grandfather Robert Fan (or Fan Wenzhao) owned before he left China in 1949, just as the Communists took power. He and my grandmother lived here with their four children, including my father, and a handful of servants.

I first visited this house in 1986, just after college, and again in 2002. I stand before it now, trying to read the history of my family in its sprawl.

My father and mother are also architects, retired from their San Francisco practice since the 1990s. I'm a journalist, raised in suburbia with only an academic understanding of China until I came back in 2005 to study Mandarin and work as a correspondent for The Washington Post.

Fifty years after he left, my father came back to the house he lived in on Huaihai Road, but he refused to go inside. He stood on the sidewalk staring at the house, his eyes red. He didn't want to change the meaning it held from his childhood.

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His Works, My History

I go in. The house is three stories, pale yellow, like margarine, with flaking green trim and rusty scaffolding that juts haphazardly from the facade. The front porch is a tailor shop, and along one side, a tiny storefront sells cheap shoes and socks.

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I walk tentatively up the steps, into a labyrinth of dark rooms. The air smells like old wood and dust, mingled with the cooking of 10 families that occupy every inch of the place, from tiny rooms in the basement to the attic. Mice dart between the loose electrical cables and portable stoves that line the dingy hallways. There's a toilet next to the kitchen sink, a curtain drawn around it to provide a modicum of privacy.

On the second floor, I find an elderly man sitting in an unheated room crammed with detritus: plastic bags, coat hangers, stacks of dried food. He wears a stained aqua windbreaker and a brown knitted cap against the cold.

"Come in. Sit down," he smiles, motioning me and my interpreter to wooden chairs.

I explain that my grandfather once owned this house. From a drawer the man fishes out a limp photocopy of a ruling issued by the People's Court, Xuhui District, in 2002. It lists my grandmother Fan Xiao Baolian as the "property owner of house No. 1292 in mid-Huaihai Road."

"It is not clear where the property owner went," the People's Court declared.

But I know the property owners went from a life of luxury in this spacious house to renting a small two-bedroom apartment in Hong Kong, still a British colony in 1949.

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The Washington Post's Maureen Fan went to homes designed by her grandfather, architect Fan Wenzhao, or Robert Fan, who left Shanghai when the Communists took over in 1949.

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renting a small two-bedroom apartment in Hong Kong, still a British colony in 1949. Their children, in search of degrees and passports to help end their statelessness, scattered to the United States, with the end result that I -- their eldest grandchild -- was born and raised in a lily-white suburb in California.

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The man, a retired plastics worker, encourages me to visit the district housing bureau to reclaim the property. If I win, he tells me, the government will upgrade his room. As I set out for the bureau, I don't know whether I'm doing it more for him or for me.

'With Your Own Culture'

I was drawn to my grandfather's buildings because I hoped I could pull some kind of meaning from them and learn more about him and China. He died in Hong Kong

when I was a teenager and too young or ignorant to extract stories about why he left China and whether he had any regrets.

From my father, I got only the barest details in between his understandable rants against the Communist Party.

"Mao Zedong was not just against capitalists. He took away freedom of speech. He launched the Cultural Revolution. He killed 2 1/2 million of his own people," my father said in one of his many tirades. "Not being for Western dancing, that's fine. But he burned Confucius's books and destroyed Chinese culture. He called America a paper tiger when America was way ahead. He was an uneducated hypocrite, and he took away the best years of my life."

In Shanghai, my grandfather spoke English at home, counted foreigners among his friends and kept Mies van der Rohe chairs in his living room. On weekends, he took my father, uncle and two aunts to see the Marx Brothers or Johnny Weissmuller's Tarzan free of charge, in theaters he designed. They were the privileged minority, preparing their children for university and jobs as doctors, lawyers, architects and engineers while Shanghai's poorer citizens died of starvation in the streets. If my father was bitter about Mao, I cannot fathom what my grandfather must have felt.

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His Works, My History

He always believed in being open to trends outside of China. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1921, thanks to scholarship funds made available by the Americans, and returned to Shanghai heavily influenced by Paul Philippe Cret, the dean of the Beaux-Arts tradition.

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He began by designing buildings that incorporated both Chinese and Western elements, such as the YMCA building with its upturned eaves and large plate-glass windows. But after a tour of Europe in 1935, he began to criticize the "Chinese style" and fully embrace modern Western-style architecture, as in his design of Shanghai's Majestic Theater in 1941.

This wasn't so surprising when Shanghai was known as the Paris of the East, a cosmopolitan, international center of trade headquartered along the Bund. But when Chairman Mao promised to nationalize private property and redistribute wealth less than a decade later, my grandfather's world and the future of anyone with Western attitudes were doomed.

And yet, many Western buildings outlasted those whims of policy, surviving the wrenching change that China has undergone over the past 50 years.

In 2003, the neoclassical Shanghai Concert Hall built by my grandfather and an architect named Zhao Chen was lifted off the ground and moved 217 feet, to allow space for an elevated roadway nearby. Some say it was saved from the wrecking ball -- at a staggering cost of \$20 million -- because it is one of the few Western-style buildings designed by the Chinese.

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The Washington Post's Maureen Fan went to homes designed by her grandfather, architect Fan Wenzhao, or Robert Fan, who left Shanghai when the Communists took over in 1949.

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One of the men responsible for saving it was Wu Jiang, former deputy director of planning and now vice president of Tongji University. In his dissertation, he countered the argument that such buildings should be torn down because they are a reminder of China's shameful colonial subjugation.

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"History cannot be changed or blotted out," Wu told me. "We should respect ourselves. No matter whether they are beautiful or not, those buildings represent your past." In 1989, Shanghai had a list of 62 protected historic buildings. Today, thanks to him, it has more than 2,130.

I had heard about Wu as I asked around for names of people who knew my grandfather. Wu's grandfather had also been an architect, and I was thrilled to discover that Wu's grandfather actually worked for my grandfather. Wu, 49, described the

difficulties his grandfather faced as a Western-trained architect who stayed in a China that had begun to set the clock backward.

Wu's father, trained as a civil engineer, was ruined by the Cultural Revolution, which reduced him to an impoverished existence in the countryside and made him a stranger to his son, Wu said. As he spoke, I thought, *I could have been Wu*.

"Every family like us has similar stories," Wu continued. "A lot of families were totally destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. But if you survived, you had a much better life. People like me were sent to university."

If you survived. Wu contrasted his life with his father's and felt grateful for going to university. I felt soft, contrasting his father's fate with my own father's acknowledgment that he could never have survived Mao's political campaigns.

Then, just when I found myself feeling lucky for having been born in the United States, Wu explained why he turned down chances to emigrate.

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"Chinese people have a different cultural background. Here, you are with your own culture," he said. "My grandfather told me an architect needs to stay in his own culture. I argued that some Chinese architects like I.M. Pei are famous in the United States. But my grandfather said no, no, no, he's not a Chinese at all."

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The Clash of Ideals

By the time my father finally returned to Shanghai in 2002, China was well into its third decade of a reform policy begun by Deng Xiaoping in 1979. My father stared through a rainy mist at the modern skyscrapers of Pudong, opposite the colonial buildings of the Bund. His disdain at some of the uglier buildings could not hide a kind of national pride, even after half a century in America.

"Amazing, they kicked out all the foreigners and managed to do all this on their own," he said, impressed. It was quickly followed by a bitter aside. "Why did they have to kill so many people, destroy so many families and sabotage their own culture to get to the same place?"

"What was all the suffering for?"

My father had just entered St. John's University in Shanghai when the Communists defeated Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists. Under the Communists, the university was dismantled piece by piece. The Harvard-trained founder and dean of the school of architecture, Henry Wang, was persecuted and imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution, reportedly turned in by his own students for being too Western.

By 1952, a xenophobic mentality had taken hold. Citizens were forced to shout slogans

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against "imperialistic capitalists." My father had to confess at weekend "study sessions" that his mind was poisoned because he came from a capitalist family. He and his friends were questioned for frequenting cafes and eating Western food. Other Chinese deemed too friendly with foreigners were persecuted so much that they chose suicide.

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When my father finally received an exit permit to visit my grandfather, he told none of his friends. He packed a knapsack with a sweater, a book and a few essentials and climbed onto a train with my grandmother, leaving behind his younger brother, then 19, and all their belongings. His two sisters had already gotten out.

What did that feel like, I often asked my father. "That was a long time ago," was his stock answer. In China, I came to see, there is no dwelling on misfortune. No whining. No hand-wringing. There's even a term for

it: "to eat bitterness."

But I was raised in Marin County, where feelings matter, and I wanted to know what it was like. Pressed, my father finally said, "Of course, I didn't feel good, but I knew Grandpa would get him out." My uncle got his exit visa about six months later, but the family couldn't have known that that was certain. What was clear was that once my father was out, he had no interest in visiting China again.

For 50 years, he refused to go, even though my mother went twice, and I went. He finally relented in 2002, worn down by the arguments of friends.

One family friend in particular, from a prominent Shanghai banking family that had lost everything when they fled, told him she had made peace with her own bitter memories by focusing on the improvements the Communists delivered.

The Communists had installed a state-run economy and cradle-to-grave job security in exchange for political loyalty. They promised to end the appalling corruption of the Nationalists but they soon substituted their own abuses of power, collectivizing farmland, sparking famines and subjecting citizens to brutal political campaigns that led to the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution. That campaign of terror against the educated and merchant classes is still felt today in the "lost" generation it produced. But at least people were no longer dying in the streets, the friend said.

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His Works, My History

My father would have belonged to that generation if he had stayed. Instead, he attended graduate school near Boston, worked in New York and raised a family in California. He never looked back. As a family, we visited my grandfather in his high-rise apartment in Hong Kong. My father would describe his life in America and my grandfather would take out his chalks and draw for me. We never talked about China.

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The 2002 trip did not change my father's views. But it seemed to jar -- perhaps along with my posting to Beijing -- his stoic pattern of not thinking or talking about the past.

One day last year, my father and I walked a well-used path with views of the Golden Gate Bridge and I talked about working in Beijing. He began talking about the revered former dean of architecture at St. John's who had studied under Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus school, and returned to China in the hopes of starting a school in the same modern tradition.

Instead, Henry Wang found himself trying not to use English and having to criticize students for reading too many Western magazines. Wang and his wife, who taught English, were both placed under house arrest. They died shortly afterward, my father said, beginning to cough violently.

I looked up to see that my father was actually crying. "Thank God Grandpa sent me to Harvard," he said, barely getting the words out. In his view, my grandfather's foresight had saved both their lives and my father's career.

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My father must have been thinking the same thing in Shanghai, standing before the house on Huaihai Road and trying to keep his emotions under control. He was silent for a long time, according to a family friend who accompanied him. When I tell him Xuhui District Housing officials say it's impossible to get the house back because there is no policy or procedure for dealing with pre-1949 houses, my father says he doesn't care.

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But there is another home, designed by my grandfather, that means more to him. This is a larger building on Yongfu Road that my father remembers as the "Bauhaus house," for its angular lines and turreted, rectangular windows. He lived here from 1932 until 1941, when he was 11.

Here, a retired doctor named Du Guoxing has rented two rooms on the second floor since 1958. Du shows me the original mosaic floor in his bathroom and the view onto the back garden where my father played as a boy.

Du and his wife actually have another place to live. "But I still spend time every day in this house to commemorate my parents," he said. "A neighbor told us the original owner was an architect, who used to live in the room next to ours. His two daughters shared this room."

It is in the lines of this house that I can see my grandfather's hopes and ambitions. This house is boxy and square from the outside, absent decorative detail and almost industrial in style. The windows are galvanized steel, once painted black but now red with rust. Inside, the stairway landings are geometric half circles. In places, I can see the original parquet floor and solid metal door handles.

This is my grandfather, trained in the Beaux-Arts but following the modern International movement that came into fashion after he returned from the United States. At a time when most Shanghai voices urged a focus on traditional Chinese design, I see him rejecting decoration that serves no purpose, applying that foreign mantra "form follows function."

I imagine him poring through American architectural magazines, not unlike the students in China today, studying the latest Western trends. I picture him lecturing colleagues and apprentices on paying attention to the competition and not looking inward, as China did for so many years.

I can see the cost of doing so in the jumbled lives of the many tenants in the house on Huaihai Road. But that house seems to no longer have any real meaning for my family. Instead, it is the house on Yongfu Road that tells me the most. It reminds me that China once looked forward and outward, and is doing so again today, faster than it has ever done before.

News researcher Zhang Jie contributed to this report.

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