

Ex-diplomat Tess Johnston mourns the loss of the architecture that kept her in Shanghai for decades, writes **Mark Andrews**

City on the brink

“I don’t do questions on politics or economics,” quips Tess Johnston at the end of her talk. Ever the diplomat, the retired US Foreign Service officer who has since become part of Shanghai society, has been regaling an audience with extracts from her memoirs *Permanently Temporary* (Old China Hand Press).

Subtitled *From Berlin to Shanghai in Half a Century*, it looks back over her life, including 33 years in the Foreign Service. Starting in shattered post-war Berlin, Johnston skilfully whisks readers through the Vietnam war, the discomfort of camel rides, the intricacies of peacock flight and finally to 1980s Shanghai.

“The city looked like a combination of 1938 Warsaw and Calcutta,” she writes. “It was grubby and grey with pollution, dilapidated and run-down, often crumbling.”

This may not read like the start of a love affair with a city, but Johnston’s memoirs reveal three great passions: dogs, antiques and architecture. Within the first two pages of most chapters, she launches into a detailed description of either a former home or office. Often these are highlighted to the detriment of the “juicy bits”.

And what a love affair it was. Her initial tour of Shanghai was from 1981 to 1986. And when the follow-up assignment in Paris failed to live up to her expectations, the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown proved to be the quirk of fate that brought Johnston back to the mainland. Fourteen years after her compulsory retirement in 1996 from the Foreign Service, she is still in Shanghai.

It is obvious speaking with Johnston that the fascination lies with Shanghai rather than China.

“I didn’t even know where China was when I was growing up and I had never met a Chinese person. My particular field of interest is what I call the Gold Coast, the treaty ports that started off with five and ended up with 49.

“I’m fascinated with the pre-war phenomenon. Here we are in China, but two-thirds of the city [Shanghai] didn’t belong to China. It was a new experience for me to see this city within a city.”

Johnston says she thought that she could identify with its people and their down-to-earth attitude. But above all, it was the buildings that captivated her.

Although she served in Vietnam

Asia Specific

and Laos, the architecture there failed to excite her. “It was largely all the same French colonial style and even then there were lots of new buildings.”

Shanghai, though, proved to be different. When she first arrived, the only new building was the Shanghai Exhibition Centre (then known as the Sino-Soviet Friendship Building) and the streets had yet to be clogged with cars and motorbikes.

“Here there were a variety of styles, of course, the art deco but also Italian, British and many more. All this was as if frozen in a time warp. There was all the old literature about it and all the history that occurred just one generation away.”

Frustrated by the paucity of information on the architecture or the buildings of Shanghai, Johnston eventually decided that she would have to collate it herself, modelling her idea on the book *In Search of Old Peking*. But she couldn’t find a suitable photographer and it wasn’t until meeting Er Dongqiang (Deke Erh) in 1991 that she could start in earnest. The initial partnership led to the publication two years later of *A Last Look – Western Architecture in Old Shanghai*. Two more books followed before Johnston retired.

Now approaching 80, Johnston shows no sign of slowing down. She has published 25 books, mainly in partnership with Deke Erh, and says two more are under way.



Tess Johnston roamed Asia as an officer with the US Foreign Service but Shanghai won her heart. Photo: Jan Siefke

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Tess Johnston, on first visiting Shanghai nearly 30 years ago

These efforts have turned Johnston into a local celebrity, as evidenced by her fan club at the Shanghai literary festival in February. Checking her schedule for the month, she shows a diary as cluttered as her home in the Xuhui district, in the former French Concession, where she is surrounded by antiques and books on architecture and old Shanghai.

No wonder Johnston feels more at home in Shanghai than in the United States.

“You have to be realistic; as an 80-year-old woman in the United States I might have three things in my calendar for a month,” she says. “Here I’m surrounded by a lot of friends, my books, my research materials and the remnants of my antique collection.”

A co-founder of the Shanghai Historic House Association, now renamed Historic Shanghai, she bemoans the loss of old buildings that were often featured in her earlier books.

“I recognise the *shikumen* [traditional Shanghai-style housing] have no plumbing, inadequate electricity, that they’re damp and crumbling. You cannot let those small low-rises exist, what with population pressures, etc,” she says. “But you do lose something that was so typically Shanghai. And then when you start building skyscrapers

it becomes like any other city in the world. In losing the uniqueness of this western enclave on the shores of China you lose something of the heart of the city.”

Along with the loss of historic buildings, Johnston decries the increase in traffic and all its associated problems.

“Beijing belatedly is starting to tackle it. I had hoped Shanghai was smarter than that and ahead of the curve.”

In a despondent moment recently, she told an interviewer: “Nothing I write will ever change anything.” But this modesty belittles the impact she has made on the understanding of historic Shanghai and perhaps a growing realisation of why it’s necessary to preserve some of it.

Indeed, some things are changing. “Now they’re beginning to discover there is commercial value to be made in [heritage] preservation,” she says.

And compared with the 1980s, when requests to shops and restaurants typically earn the retort, “*Mei you*” (not available), life is considerably more convenient for expatriates and locals these days, she says. “I’m dazzled by what I can buy now. You can probably buy anything you need in China now so long as you are prepared to pay the price.”

Johnston on a firing range in Vietnam during the war. Photo: Tess Johnston