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Banner calligraphy  Huai Su 懷素 (737–799), Tang calligrapher and Buddhist monk

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"Modernity" is one of the most prevalent concerns of contemporary historians but in the case of the hotel that will be the subject of this article, it is no mere fashionable keyword—rather, it was an appellation affixed to the very building. Originally “Moderne”, now “Modern”, it received its name, in French-sounding Russian, in the 1910s, and it is up to us to decipher the meaning of this defining feature.

Before we can get to meaning, however, we should start with location and history. The Moderne was inseparable from the main avenue of Harbin: by its Russian name, Kitaiskaia ulitsa (Chinese Street), and by its Chinese name since the 1920s, Zhongyang dajie 中央大街 (Central Main Street). Today, as in the early twentieth century, Central Main Street in Daoli 道里 district (the district formerly known in Russian as Pristan’, literally The Wharf) is the glittering showcase of Harbin and attracts all visitors to the city.1 Lined with expensive shops and fashionable eating places, it culminates at its northern end with the embankment and promenade of the Songhuajiang 松花江 (the Songhua, or in Russian usage, Sungari River).

A Russian History

When was the hotel built? Who designed and named it? The need to ascertain these details arises in view of the fact that the hotel’s current management, the state-owned enterprise Hotel Modern, celebrated its ninetieth anniversary in 1996 and its hundredth in 2006. Such anniversaries and centenaries were often staged by enterprises in China in the 1990s and 2000s, and the tourist industry in Harbin did not lag behind the national trend. In a promotional booklet on the hotel’s history, issued for the festivities of 1996, the construction of the Moderne was dated to 1906 and attributed to an otherwise unfamiliar architect, whose name was transcribed as A.L. Youjinluofu 尤金洛夫. He was supposedly a Russian who had studied architecture in Paris, and in 1901 came from Moscow to Harbin, where he “struck up a friendship at first sight with

I am grateful for comments I received from my audience at the XVIII Conference of the European Association of Chinese Studies in Riga, Latvia, where an earlier version of this paper was presented on 15 July 2010. I am particularly indebted to Prof. Olga Bakich (Toronto) for the generous interest she has taken in this study. I thank the Upton Sino-Foreign Archive (Steve Upton, Curator), Concord, New Hampshire, for permission to use images from that archive. My research was supported by The Israel Science Foundation (grant no. 1258/09) and The Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation (grant RG002-P-08).

1 A book about it is included in the Beijing-published series of “famous streets in China”: see Yang Rongqiu and Xie Zhongtian, Tianjie yicai: Ha'erbin Zhongyang dajie [A Heavenly Street of Exotic Splendour: Harbin’s Central Main Street] (Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe, 2000).

2 Liu Liankun et al., eds, Madie’er jushui nian [Ninety Years of the Moderne] (Harbin: Heilongjiang hauimei caise zhujian gongshi, 1996), pp.3–4. Despite being egregiously wrong on the hotel’s early years, the team of local historians whom the hotel management had mobilized for this booklet unearthed much interesting material, especially on the later Republican and early Communist periods. Such material on the Moderne’s history is available nowhere else and this source, therefore, will be used extensively if critically below.

3 On the architect, see the well-documented studies by N.P. Kradin, Khabar — russkata Atlantis [Harbin: The Russian Atlantis] (Khabarovsk: Khvorov A. Iu., 2001), pp.183–
The first performances at the Moderne took place on 25 September 1914, with the joint ownership of Kaspe and V.I. Aleksandrov. Note that dates follow the Julian calendar, which lagged thirteen days behind the common (Gregorian) calendar in the twentieth century and was in use in Russia until February 1913.

The first performances at the Moderne took place on 25 September 1914, with the arrival of an ensemble from Vladivostok. “Teatr ‘Modern’,” Zheleznodorozhnaia zhizn’ no.36–37 (1914), p.14, which also mentions the joint ownership of Kaspe and V.I. Aleksandrov. Note that dates follow the Julian calendar, which lagged thirteen days behind the common (Gregorian) calendar in the twentieth century and was in use in Russia until February 1913.

The present-day successor, Lungmen Grand Hotel, thus inherited a history as rich as that of the Moderne, although the link it claims with the CPR Hotel, by using the year 1903 in its logo and promotional publications, may be disputed. In 2003, the newspaper celebrated its centenary: see Liang Bo, ed., Bainian laodian: Lungmen dasha gushubiao: 1903–2003 [A Hundred-year Old Shoppe: the Ad 1903-2003] (today’s Nangang district) was completed by 1904, it may not have been used as a hotel before being converted to serve as a hospital during the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–5. Becoming the seat of the Russian Consulate and an Officers’ Club in 1907, it was renovated in 1920 and housed the headquarters of the CPR Directorate from then on; only under the Japanese regime, who carried out another extensive renovation, was it returned to its originally designated use and opened, in February 1937, as Harbin’s Yamato Hotel. In approximate chronological order, the predecessors of Hotel Moderne were Hotel Orient, with a cinema located in New Town, and the Grand Hotel across the road from the Harbin railway station, on Sungari Avenue, which too had a theatre stage and a cinema, and, evidently, must have opened by late 1903. Another early establishment was Hotel Bellevue in Old Harbin (the city’s southern district, known as Xiangfang in Chinese), which a memoirist described as having once been “the best in town” but having fallen into decline by 1912 due to the relocation of Harbin’s administrative centre to New Town. The impressions that Western travellers to Harbin have left of its fledgling hotel industry were not all favourable.

By the year 1925, the Harbin Yellow Pages no longer included the Bellevue. They did list, under the rubric “hotels”, a total of thirty-seven establishments of varying standard, most of them under Russian (and a few under Chinese) administration in Harbin, and another fourteen hotels expressly marked as “Chinese” and mainly located in Fujiadian (today’s Daowai district), the Chinese town to the east of Daoli district. In addition, eight Japanese hotels were listed in the large section on “the Japanese colony in Harbin”, an indication that the Japanese presence in the city was already important at that time.

The alleged foundation year of the Moderne, which the hotel website now proclaims with the unfortunate English formulation, “legend from 1906”, is a legend indeed, a reflection of the marketing appeal of Harbin’s early years. A wall plaque designating the hotel as a “first-class preserved building”, put up by the city administration in 1997, attempted to square the circle by claiming the hotel was “originally founded” in 1906, while
also saying its construction was completed by 1913. That “1906” has often been repeated without any such qualification in present-day Chinese sources attests to an uncritical acceptance of this promotional history. There is also some confusion between the opening of the hotel and the beginning of the business activities of the person who earned his place in Harbin history as the Moderne’s founding owner, Iosif A. Kaspe.

Curiously, an English-language advertisement for the hotel in 1938, after Kaspe’s departure from China, pushed its beginnings even further back in time by claiming that the Moderne was in existence since 1903 and was then marking its thirty-fifth year (see Figure 1). Perhaps, 1903 was when Kaspe first arrived in Harbin, although it was only after taking part in the Russo-Japanese war that he settled in the city. Having started out as a clothes dealer, Kaspe moved into the jewellery business and he incorporated a jewellery shop into his hotel. Initially, the Moderne was in the joint ownership of Kaspe and the Russian lawyer Vladimir I. Aleksandrov (1869–1954), and see a postcard view of the Orient in the (unpaginated) illustrations section in Melikhov, Belyi Kharbin: seredina 20-kh [White Harbin: Mid-1920s] (Moscow: Russkii Put’, 2003).

8 Shi Fang, Gao Ling, and Liu Shuang, Ha'erbin Ejiao shi [The History of Russian Emigrés in Harbin], 2nd ed. (Harbin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe, 2003), p.280, give both 1899 and 1905 as the foundation year. Siberian businessman Ivan V. Kul’ev (1857–1941), resident of Harbin from 1900 to 1925, owned the building, which he leased to the CER and later (until 1935) to the Japanese administration of the South Manchuria Railway. See Innokentii Charov, Albom Kharbina. Gorod i ego okrestnosti [A Harbin Album: The City and Its Environos] (Harbin: author’s unpaginated edition, 1930); and Zarja (Harbin) of 21 March 1935. Commentary to a photograph in Li Shuxiao, ed., Ha'erbin yuanying [Old Photos of Harbin] (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2000), p.57, says the hotel had a cinema hall; cf. postcard view of Grand Hôtel du Commerce, in Levoshko, Russkaiia arkhitektura v Man'czhuriyi, p.92. On theatre performances there in winter 1903, see Melikhov, Man’czhuriia dalekaia i blizkaia, p.152.


10 The British writer Maurice Baring (1874–1945), who spent a week in Harbin in May 1904, included the following description in his report from the Russo-Japanese war, With the Russians in Manchuria (London: Methuen, 1905), p.34: “I eventually found rooms in the Hotel Orient, which I think must be the most expensive hotel in the world; it is kept by two ex-convicts, with squinting eyes and a criminal expression; and the prices of food and lodging were exalted beyond dreams of Ritz. The bedroom was damp and dirty, and cost 15s. a day, without the bed”. He went on to say that “the population of Kharbin consists almost entirely of ex-convicts and Chinamen. […] The cab drivers were all ex-convicts, and fearful tales were told one of how, if dissatisfied with their fares, they merely killed you and threw your body into the street”. The Bellevue, originally a “café chantant”, was indeed owned by an ex-convict, the Georgian Gamarteli: see Melikhov, Man’czhuriia dalekaia i blizkaia, p.79. The traumatic experience of lodging in an unidentified Harbin hotel was narrated in B.L. Putnam Weale, Manchu and Muscovite, Being Letters from Manchuria Written during the Autumn of 1903 (London: Macmillan, 1904), p.142: “The name of my hotel (save the mark!) I

Figure 1
Advertisement for Hotel Moderne (1938). From Dan Ben-Canaan archives collection—The Sino-Israel Research and Study Center, Heilongjiang University, School of Western Studies, Harbin.
will not divulge, for my hosts were passing good people, and I am about to damn their beds and rooms more unutterably than anything has ever been damned before. It may have been the Orient, or perhaps, the Zolotoi iakov (Ancre d’or), the only hotel listed under “Kharbin” in the guide by Claudius Madrolle, *Chine du Nord et de l’Ouest* (Paris: Comité de l’Asie française, 1904), p.68, while “the new railway hotel”, which the China-born author of *Manchu and Masocotte* noticed being built near the central station, and the completion of which he advised future visitors to await (pp.140, 142), must have been the CER Hotel, which would have its function modified by the war. In May 1909, American travellers enjoyed the room and especially the supper offered them at the Grand Hotel: their only qualms were about “a moving-picture show” in the dining saloon, a form of “nocturnal [entertainment], accompanied with dancing and carousing” they chose not to explore, retiring early to their beds. Marcus Lorenzo Taft, *Strange Siberia along the Trans-Siberian Railway: A Journey from the Great Wall of China to the Sky-scrapers of Manhattan* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1911), pp.54–5.

12 Ibid., pp.135–36.
13 A caption below a photograph of him with his two sons, Semen and Vladimir, which the Harbin daily *Rugor* printed as part of a report on Semen’s funeral in December 1933, drew readers’ attention to the “Cross of St George (for the russo-Japanese war) in the buttonhole of his jacket”. According to S. Kurbatov, “Poslednii komendant” [“the last Commandant”], *Zaria*, 2 March 1935, the harbin resident, tsarist general Mikhail M. Ivanov (1881–1935), received financial support from Iosif Kaspe, his former “brave soldier”. Kaspe’s war service is also mentioned in Amilto Vespa, *Secret Agent of Japan: A Handbook to Japanese Imperialism* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1988), p.195.

16 Kradin, *Kharbin – risskata Atlantida*, p.235 (quoting *Zaria* of 1 Jan. 1932); on the architect, see ibid., pp.200–204. Aleksandrov, however, sold his share to Kaspe when he left Harbin for Japan in 1924. From 1921 to 1923 the hotel underwent extensive renovation, the completion of which was marked by an opening ceremony on 10 October 1923. In late 1931, with the participation of architect Petr S. Sviridov (1889–1971) and the close involvement of Kaspe himself, the hotel’s cinema and theatre hall was enlarged from a capacity of 700 spectators to 1200. In the meantime, Japan had invaded Manchuria in September 1931, establishing the puppet state of Manchukuo in the subsequent year.

On 24 August 1933, Iosif Kaspe’s son was kidnapped. The twenty-four-year-old pianist Semen Kaspe, who had lived and studied in Paris since 1926 and had become a French citizen, returned to his native Harbin for what was planned as a series of concerts in China and Japan. Kaspe senior, by some accounts defiant in the face of adversity and by others badly affected by the strain, placed his hopes in the independent investigation launched by the young vice-consul of France in Harbin and did not pay the ransom money (which, it appears, he could not have raised) even after the bandits had cut off and sent him his son’s earlobes. After three months of suffering, Semen was murdered on 24 November. The kidnapping scheme was part of attempts by the Japanese police to take over Jewish property in Manchukuo; the Russian criminals had connections with the anti-Semitic Russian Fascist Party, which in turn enjoyed close Japanese support. In having a political background, the Kaspe case was special; as an incident attesting to the lack of individual security in occupied Manchuria, it was just one event in a series that had marked the preceding two years. The numerous kidnappings that both Russian and Chinese gangs carried out in Harbin in 1932 had targeted foreigners as well as wealthy Chinese residents.

After burying Semen in Harbin, Iosif Kaspe left for Paris, to join his wife Maria and their younger son Vladimir. He died in Paris in October 1938. In June 1940 the German army marched in. By 1942 Vladimir found refuge in Mexico, where he was to remain as a distinguished architect and academic to the end of his long life. A private person, he did not speak of his past, but did tell a historian of architecture in Mexico that seeing his father pore over detailed construction plans had been his first encounter with architecture (he did not say that the building in question was a hotel). He described his father as a jeweller and only mentioned that his pianist brother had died in an “accident”. In histories of Harbin, the abduction and brutal end of Semen went down as the “Kaspe affair”.

The gist of this gruesome tale is known to many residents of Harbin today: tourists could hear it from their taxi driver while en route to the Moderne (today’s four-star Modern Hotel) from the airport or railway station. Reaching their destination, until a few years ago they would be able to see life-size oil portraits of Iosif and Maria Kaspe and of their martyred son (shown standing by his piano), which were commissioned from surviving photographs and hung in hotel corridors in 2001. An “urban legend” in local Chinese memory, the affair had also been something of the kind for Russians who stayed on in Harbin through the Manchukuo period to the end of the Second World War and would only leave China in the 1950s. Olga Bakich, born in Harbin in 1938, remembers being told in her youth that the Moderne was still haunted by its inconsolable founder.
Manchuria. No longer under the supervision of Iosif Kaspe, another round of refurbishment was undertaken in the Moderne in 1934. In spring 1936, the ageing Russian opera star Feodor Chaliapin (1873–1938) lodged there as he performed in Harbin during his Far Eastern tour, which also included Japan and Shanghai. In 1937 more renovation work was carried out in the hall and the entrance area by architect Mikhail A. Bakich (1909–2002).

In July of the same year, strong competition for the title of Harbin’s best hotel arose for the first time since the opening of the Moderne, when a Japanese businessman launched Hotel New Harbin in New Town. Designed by a team of Russian engineers in a mixture of modern European and Japanese styles, with both the latest technical innovations and a Buddhist temple, the New Harbin had five floors to Moderne’s three and 120 rooms to its hundred, and was considered the largest construction in the city. Still in operation today as the four-star International Hotel Harbin, its particular history as a relic of the Japanese occupation period is harder to promote domestically than that of the Moderne.

Once Iosif Kaspe left the scene, the Japanese authorities initially put the management of Hotel Moderne in the hands of an émigré by the name of Khorosh. The hotel had been important for Harbin’s Jews. “Here the representatives of Jewish business met with their Chinese and Russian partners. Up until the middle of the 1930s it is here that all events, balls and celebrations of the Jewish community of Harbin were held”. After some tense negotiations between the Japanese and the local Jewish leadership, management was transferred to the community’s honorary secretary, Moisei G. Zimin. Community balls then continued to be hosted by the Moderne (lesser Jewish festivities, staged elsewhere until 1943, returned to the Moderne in the last two years of Japanese rule). In August 1945, when the victorious Red Army entered Harbin, hotel manager Zimin was arrested along with many other notable Russian and Jewish figures, eventually to perish in a Soviet camp.

Since 1946, when the Soviet forces moved out of Harbin, the hotel has been under continuous Chinese management. It is at this point that we turn from the Russian-Jewish history of the Moderne to its subsequent phase as a former luxury hotel in Communist China.

A Chinese History

In early 1948 the Chinese Communist Party gathered over three hundred Party cadres in the Moderne with the aim of expounding to them the strategy of managing “large cities”. Harbin had been the first such city to come under Communist control in the course of the Chinese Civil War in April 1946. From September to November 1948 the CCP convened in the Moderne political personages associated with the Democratic Party, non-affiliated figures and representatives of overseas Chinese, to begin preparations for the first Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. In the hotel, they were visited and kept in check by high-ranking Communist officials. In August 1949, the hotel’s name and function were radically modified with its designation as The Harbin City Government Guesthouse. Across the country, Western-style hotels that had opened in China since the late nineteenth century were nationalized and redefined as guesthouses (招待所). Their guests in the 1950s were also no longer Russian or Western tourists or businessmen, but CCP officials, arriving in Harbin on inspection tours or passing through on their way to the Soviet Union.


18 On Iosif Kaspe’s death, see Poslednie novosti (Paris), no.6413, 17 Oct. 1938; also Kradin, Kharbin – russkaya Atlantisiya, p.255. On Vladimir Kaspé (Harbin, 1910 – Mexico City, 1996), see entry by Alberto González Pozo in The Grove Art Online (Oxford Art Online). I thank Alberto González Pozo and Louise Noelle, author of a monograph on Kaspe’s architectural work, for sharing with me some of their reminiscences of Vladimir Kaspe in personal communications.

In 1953, the Guesthouse became known as Harbin Hotel (Ha’erbin lûshe 哈爾濱旅社); in 1966, this name was changed again, this time to The Harbin City Revolutionary Committee Second Guesthouse. Soon thereafter, a photograph of the former Moderne in mid-August 1966 shows the building bearing the poster “Fanzhu fandian” 返修飯店 (Anti-revisionist hotel). Another city landmark, the Churin (Tschurin) department store in Harbin’s Nangang district, was also renamed in the Cultural Revolution, as were a number of Harbin streets, to become “The East is Red” (Dongfang hong 東方紅) department store in September. Throughout the PRC, institutions associated with Russia in the past or the Soviet Union in the present came under attack as the closest ally of Communist China during the 1950s was denounced as “revisionist” after the Sino–Soviet rift of 1960.

In 1983, the quondam Hotel Moderne was renamed once again, becoming Harbin Hotel (the translation of Ha’erbin binguan 哈爾濱賓館). It had remained a city-administered guesthouse throughout, but it had by then fallen into disrepair. In the new economy of the 1980s, things began to change quickly, however, and the Chinese hotel industry was reborn in these years. In January 1987, the name Madie’er 馬迭爾 was restored to the hotel after a new management team had completed an extensive programme of renovation works, launched in June of the preceding year. There was still more growth in the early 1990s, when the three floors of the original building were expanded to four. The old-new Chinese name Madie’er was officially registered in August 1993, along with the English appellation Modern Hotel.

Further work in 2000 once more altered the building, whose original concert hall, dancing hall and “white hall” cannot be seen any more.

In the mid-1990s the Harbin municipal government first began to promote tourism to the city by renovating selected relics of its Russian-period architecture. “Old brand names” were “revived”: the former Dongfang hong, known as the Songhuajiang department store since 1972, had already regained its time-honoured name Qiulin 秋林 (Autumn Forest), a transcription of Churin, in October 1984. The Modern Hotel too strove to emphasize its connection with history. History was, in fact, its main asset, as despite its prime location and continuous redevelopment, its claim to being the best hotel in Harbin could not be sustained once new luxury hotels were built in the 1990s. After staging its anniversaries in 1996 and 2006, the Modern Hotel collaborated with Heilongjiang 黑龙江 University to invite the Jewish Harbinites, Esther and Paul Agran (Agranovsky) from Chicago, to celebrate their sixtieth wedding anniversary at the hotel in September 2008. In 2009, the hotel organized a spring ball, to which elderly Harbinites from all over the world (some of whom had attended the original “spring halls” as young people in the 1940s) were invited.

Separate Histories?

Is it possible to bring together the Russian and the Chinese histories of the Moderne for the period before the 1950s, when most émigrés left Harbin and China? The memories that Russian and other European former residents of Harbin associate with the Moderne mostly derive from its multipurpose cinema, theatre and concert hall. In the “white hall” (bel’tz sal) of the hotel’s restaurant, student parties took place and wedding receptions were given, and when important city personages departed Harbin they were seen off there in farewell banquets. Charity events were not only staged in the Moderne by the Jewish community, but also by the Russian, as well as by the Georgian,
the Armenian and other communities. The hotel was a more immediate presence in the lives of the Russian-speaking residents of Harbin than in the daily existence of the Chinese city. Being Russian owned and relatively expensive, it formed part of the self-contained space in which the Harbin Russians moved. It offered them a temporary extra layer of isolation from the surrounding Asian world—an enclave within an enclave. As Russian space in the city irrevocably shrank, the Moderne—despite its bouts of renovation and the kidnapping crisis of 1935—remained reassuringly unchanging.

If the Moderne excluded the great majority of local Chinese, it was on the basis of social standing rather than race. Chinese as well as Japanese guests had lodged and been feted there in the Kaspe period: the Japanese writer Hasegawa Nyozeakan 長谷川如是閑 (1875–1969) stayed at the Moderne in 1928, and later criticized it on many counts. Song Qingling 宋慶齡 (1892–1981), the widow of President Sun Yat-sen 孫逸仙 (1866–1925), was welcomed with a banquet in the hotel by mayor He Yufang 何玉芳 on 16 May 1929, as she changed trains in Harbin on her return from a visit to Soviet Russia and Belgium. The Harbin municipal government had passed from Russian into Chinese hands as recently as 1926; the next city mayor, Song Wenyu 宋文郁, marked his appointment with a banquet in the Moderne, which he offered to the foreign consuls in Harbin in November 1930.

We may conclude that the Moderne was a privileged city institution, frequented by both the Western and Chinese elites. In a city that functioned as a railway junction between Russia, China and Japan, the rich and powerful could use the hotel to display their wealth and position to outsiders as well as to each other.

The rules by which they had to play were Western, however. The Moderne maintained a European atmosphere and, until passing into Chinese management in 1946, specialized in Western food. Although the cinema in Hotel Moderne does not seem to have shown Chinese films before the 1940s, by the 1910s advertisements for the American and European films that the Moderne cinema scheduled were placed in Harbin’s Chinese newspapers, as well as in the Russian press. The hotel’s concert programme in the 1930s included performances by local Chinese, Japanese and Korean music students, while a number of Peking-opera stars also came to perform in the Moderne during the Manchuko period. These were some of the different “faces” the Moderne was able to show to each of Harbin’s ethnic communities. While managers Kaspe and Zimin must have known what services they provided simultaneously to their varied clientele, the many-sidedness of the hotel can only be revealed now by a cross-reading of Russian and Chinese sources.

The Memory of Russian “Style Moderne” in Manchuria

The reason why the original name of the hotel is spelled “Moderne” rather than “Modern” in this article is that this is how the word was pronounced in Russian, with the accent placed on the second syllable. After the Japanese army entered Harbin in February 1932, Iosif Kaspe devised a scheme he hoped would guarantee his establishment against expropriation by the new regime. As both his sons had become naturalized in France (where they spelled their surname as Kaspé), the Russian émigré Kaspe (the accent of the Jewish surname is placed on the first syllable) transferred ownership of the hotel to them and hoisted the French flag on the build-

speaker attended in the hotel in June 2006 as president of the Association of Former Jewish Residents of China in Israel. Judging by names listed in Harbin phone books available for 1925 and 1926, manager Khorosh must have been Jewish, too.


28 See list of hotel directors in Liu Liankun et al., *Modiere’er jiusi shi*, pp.15–16.


31 Ibid., p.6.


33 See the draft history, Qiulin gongsi 记者联社 *Qiulin gongsi* shizhi (Chronicle of Main Events in the History of the Qiulin Company), typescript (Harbin: no publisher, 1990), p.53. In August 1966 the street of the Soviet embassy in Beijing was renamed “Anti-revisionist Street”. The atmosphere of the time is described in A. Zhelekovtsev, “Kul’turnaia revoliutsiia” s blizkogo rass-toiania” [*The Cultural Revolution* at Close Quarters], part 3, *Noysi mir*, no.3 (1968), pp.200–2.

34 See photograph with the bilingual sign Haerbin binguan / Harbin Hotel in Liu Liankun et al., *Modiere’er jiusi nian*, illustrations, p.46.


Photos and a report on the reception and elaborate programme are in *Bulletin IYS*, 56.398 (April – May 2009), English section, pp.79, 84–5. In October 2008, the president of the Modern Hotel travelled to Israel as part of a delegation of the Harbin tourist company, which was also received at the Association of Former Residents of China. Ibid., Russian section, p.34.

See, for example, the memoirs of a musician who performed in the Moderne: Helmut Stern, *Saitensprünge: Erinnerungen eines Kosmopoliten wider Willen* (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002), p.61 (on the Moderne cinema), p.74 (the concert hall), p.119 (decline of the Moderne in the 1940s). Note that, as the hall had a separate entrance from that used by the hotel guests, going to watch a film or hear a concert in the Moderne normally did not imply a visit in the hotel itself.

A reporter for the newspaper *Zaria* wrote, on 1 January 1932: ‘After the ’Moderne’, it even seems strange to step out once again into the familiar Harbin street. It feels as if you had just been to another city, richer and neater than our Harbin’. Cited in Kradin, *Kharbin – russkaja Atlantida*, p.234.

No mention of French inspiration, or comparisons with Versailles, appear in Russian sources and what hints we do have seem to point in another direction. Describing the work of B.J. Gordon—a Jewish interior designer, born in Lithuania and trained in Vilnius, Berlin and Munich—in the decoration of the walls and ceiling in the Moderne dining hall, the specialist Harbin journal *Architecture and Life* (Arkhitektura i zhizn’) admiringly called it an expression of “the German school”. But it would be wrong to regard the hotel as “German” in style or design: it is better described as “eclectically European”. Notably, there were no Chinese elements. The hotel’s main stylistic orientation was expressed by its very name, *moderne* being the Russian term for what we know as Art Nouveau in French and English, and as *Jugendstil* in German. Art Nouveau certainly considered itself “new” as well as “modern”;
a major gallery, opened in Paris in 1898, was called La Maison Moderne. In Moscow and St Petersburg, Art Nouveau developed rapidly after 1900, losing ground mainly to Neo-Classicism after 1910.

Iosif Kaspe would probably have been aware of the existence of a Hotel Moderne in pre-revolutionary Irkutsk, the Siberian city with which Harbin had closer connections than with Paris. While the sources presently at our disposal do not allow us to find out what, precisely, “moderne” meant for Kaspe and his hotel guests in the 1910s, a recent study of Art Nouveau architecture in the Russian Far East has dated its vogue in the region between the early 1900s and 1915, highlighting both the particular importance of this building style in Manchuria and the conceptual link that contemporaries drew between “moderne” and “modernity”. A historian of Russian architecture in Manchuria has described Harbin’s Hotel Moderne as a composition of late (“rational”) Art Nouveau and the retrospective Neo-Renaissance style. Independent of architectural definitions, however, modernity as a condition and a promise was a message that Western luxury hotels carried with them ever since their emergence in China in the late Qing dynasty.

Before the now standard term, *xiandai* 現代, had been adopted into Chinese from Japanese, the word “modern” in China of the early republican period was transcribed as *modeng* 摩登. As to *Madie’er*, it was one of several ways that Chinese speakers in Harbin in the 1910s and 1920s had found to transcribe the hotel’s foreign name phonetically without attempting to translate its meaning. There must not have been a signboard in Chinese as late as 1929 (cf. Figure 4, a luggage label in which only English is used), otherwise it would be hard to explain why the journalist Zhao Junhao 趙君豪, who spent three days in Harbin as part of a tour of the northeast with some Shanghai colleagues in spring of that year, introduced the hotel as “the Modie’er’en 马迭爾恩, i.e. *Modern*, which means ‘modern’ (*xiandai*), but sounds Modie’er’en when Russians read it”. Zhao was much impressed by his stay in “the modern hotel” (*xiandai lüguan* 現代旅館), as he was by Harbin prosperity in general, although he complained about the hotel’s prices being higher than in Shanghai.

By the Japanese period, *Madie’er* (馬迭爾) was the accepted form of the hotel’s name (see Figure 5). Photographs of the time show these Chinese characters in the left-hand corner of the signboard put up at the entrance to the Moderne cinema, while the Japanese transcription of “modern”, *モダン*, appeared in the right-hand corner. The Russian form *Модерн*, set in large letters, still occupied the centre. On the hotel’s signboard today, the order of “Hôtel Moderne” (the French words Iosif Kaspe and his Russian clientele instinctively had in mind, when placing or reading an advertisement in Russian for *Отель Модерн*, “‐*Otel’* Modern”) has been reversed, to produce “Modern Hotel”. In the passage to what was now intended as English, the final “e” of “Moderne” had been dropped (the case of Moderne Hotel in New York City suggests that keeping it might have been the better solution), while both Russian and Japanese scripts have definitely disappeared.

The Chinese name of the hotel, *Madie’er*, preserves to this day a peculiar Harbin transcription that no Chinese speaker from outside the city would identify with “modern” (*xiandai*). More than just a hotel, since 1994 Madie’er has been a limited liability company with wide-ranging investments reaching well beyond the local tourist industry. The “secret” Harbin word has the allure of a brand name (the hotel’s corner store sells popular “Madie’er...
ice cream”, “Madie’er yoghurt” and “Madie’er bread”) that adds the glamour of new China to the flair of tradition and the titillation of an old kidnapping story, which hotel flyers retell. At this writing, the face of Modern hotel is turned more towards its Chinese present than its Russian past, and although photographs (instead of life-size oils) of Kaspe family members are still prominently on display, most of the history showcased through photographic exhibitions and commemorative plaques put up since 2009, focuses on the hotel as birthplace of the Political Consultative Conference in 1948. Merged with a cultivated nostalgia for an imagined cosmopolitan Harbin between the twilight days of tsarist Russia and the dark age of Japanese rule, its name and many-faceted history help to keep the former hotel Moderne a landmark of its city and—to conclude, despite all the manipulation of memory, on a “French note”—a lieu de mémoire.

Afterword: Hotels in Colonial Cities

Far better studied than Harbin, the history of Shanghai offers comparative insights into the functions that hotels were called upon to perform in the mixed European-Asian society of the Chinese treaty port. Traditional China had a network of guesthouses for travelling officials and inns for private travellers. Towns had their public meeting places—for men only—in such locations as the teahouse, the theatre and the opera. The creation of Western-style theatres and concert halls as places one entered by paying a fee, and the emergence of amateur clubs, were a nineteenth-century innovation. In late-Qing Shanghai, partly because private lodgings were cramped, men often preferred to meet at courtesan houses. Finding the right space for meetings between foreigners and Chinese posed a more delicate problem. Jerome Ch’en noticed that dinner parties in Shanghai, in which company was mixed, were not held in Western or Chinese private homes, but in restaurants or hotels. With the purpose of strengthening social contacts, employees of British firms in the second half of the 1920s were given instructions to meet...
important Chinese ... in your own houses ... a much better compliment than entertaining in a hotel".69 Outside the treaty ports, where few foreigners ventured, Western-style hotels were less required and a traveller passing through Nanchang in 1933 could observe that the local Grand hotel de Kiangsi, "the chief hotel in a provincial capital", bore "no other trace of foreign influence" than its grand foreign name.70

The landmarks of Republican-period Shanghai included the Hotel Cathay (now merged into the Peace Hotel, heping fandian 平和飯店). Opened in 1929, it was associated with a Sephardic Jewish businessman far more affluent than Iosif Kaspe, Sir Victor Sassoon (1881–1961).71 When the Peace Hotel celebrated its "hundredth anniversary" on 8 March 2006 (the same year, it will be recalled, as the Modern hotel in Harbin), it did so by appropriating the memory of Cathay’s predecessor, the Palace Hotel, which originally occupied the southern flank of today’s hotel complex. The luxurious Park hotel in Shanghai, designed in 1934 by the émigré Hungarian architect Laszlo E. Hudec (1893–1958), was, with its twenty-four floors, the tallest skyscraper in the Far East until the 1960s.72 Renamed the International hotel (Guoji fandian 国际飯店) in the PRC period, it still preserves the name Park hotel in English. Buildings such as this spread the new "modern" style, the Art Deco, which became more prominent in Shanghai than anywhere else.

Various facets of luxury hotels in Asia of the late colonial period have been addressed in a valuable recent volume by a team of French historians.73 Their work on Korea, China and Japan highlights some of the themes that have also been raised in this study, the most important being the idea of the "grand hôtel" as a lieu de sociabilité. The function of serving as meeting places for foreigners, expatriates and indigenous inhabitants of the city still distinguishes hotels of this category in Asia from their parallels in the West.74 The new Western-style hotels that emerged in Chinese cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou in the early 1980s were also, in the words of one attentive observer, "space capsules seeded throughout dreary urban landscapes"; “chandeliered palaces of modernity".75 Entering them in those

Figure 5
Hotel luggage label. Courtesy of Upton Sino-Foreign Archive, Concord, New Hampshire

62 Zhao Junhao, “Ha’erbin jianwen lu” ("Things Seen and Heard in Harbin"), in his Youchen suoji (Trifles from a Voyage in the Mortal World) (Shanghai: Hanwen zhengkai yinshuju, 1934), pp.158–60. Earlier in this chapter on Harbin, Zhao called the hotel Modie’er 莫迭兒 (p.125).

63 Liu Liankun et al., Madie’er jiushi nian, illustrations, p.35. Cf. the photograph in Meng Lie et al., Hua shuo Ha’erbin [Pictures Tell About Harbin] (Beijing: Hualing chubanshe, 2002), p.103.


69 Robert Bickers, Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism 1900–1949 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp.181–82; cf. further remarks on the importance of this change in behaviour patterns, ibid., pp.206, 212, 229. Bickers comments that British company employees interacted far more closely with Chinese by the end of the 1930s, than they had in the 1920s.


71 The construction of Sassoon House on the corner of The Bund and Nanking Road began in 1926. It was the first skyscraper in Shanghai; eight more were realized by Sassoon from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s. Cathay Mansions, which Sassoon built in the French concession in 1929, has been known since 1951 as the Jin Jiang hotel, the name under which it has lodged heads of states such as President Nixon in 1972. On the Shanghai hotels mentioned here, see also Françoise Ged, “Urbanité, modernité et permanence du grand hôtel shanghaïen”, in Les grands hôtels en Asie, ed. Thierry Sanjuan, pp.123–26.

72 There were 22 floors above ground, the last of them a nightclub, and two more underground. Hudec had arrived in Shanghai via Harbin in 1918, having fought in the Austro-Hungarian army
years, before “Western” metropolitan modernity had been domesticated, was like stepping into a foreign country.

Similarly, two of the contemporary reports cited here on the Hotel New Harbin and the Hotel Moderne in the 1930s described them as places where, as if by magic, a visitor could feel lifted away from surrounding reality. This rings true for luxury hotels in general, but is all the more so with hotels deliberately projecting the image of radical distance (whether geographically specified, or merely imagined) from their physical environment. Hotel New Harbin did combine European grandeur with Japanese modernity and even with elements of Buddhist tradition. The Art Deco hotel Cathay in Shanghai made an elaborate display of a Chinese dragon design, said to be modelled after the Forbidden City in Beijing. Signalling detachment from its Asian location, Hotel Moderne, by contrast, may have offered its patrons the one space in Harbin where they could feel transported “elsewhere”—the feeling for which the French ailleurs might yet be the best word even if transportation to Paris (cf. Figure 6), or Versailles, was not necessarily intended. It probably gave this sweet sensation to Asians as well as to former and would-be Europeans. At the same time, through facilities such as the banquet halls that were used by both Chinese and Russian-speaking elites, or the cinema that could be frequented by members of all ethnic communities in the city, the Moderne also created space in which the inhabitants of Harbin could encounter each other.

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Figure 6
Postal cover on Hotel Moderne stationery, bearing a stamp of the Manchukuo Empire; mailed from Harbin to Paris in 1935. Courtesy of Upton Sino-Foreign Archive, Concord, New Hampshire