Preface: On naming

I think of *Shanghai* (上海) in its literal sense, as a city *above sea* (上/*shang* translates into English as *above*; 海/*hai* as *sea*). For me, this name has evoked the promise of transcending cultural divides ever since my grandfather, Yeye, spoke of the metropolis he travelled to as a youth before the 1949 founding of the People's Republic of China. "Shanghai was the most modern city in the whole Republic ... full of foreign fashions, architecture, movies, police, and dancehalls ... terrifying and enthralling!" The *above sea* translation took on new meaning when I visited Shanghai as a teenager—the sky in those days was full of brightly colored construction cranes. "All German cranes," proclaimed my Shanghainese aunts, uncles, and cousins, as they whisked us to the freshly constructed Oriental Pearl TV Tower of the Pudong New Economic Zone, Shanghai Museum in People's Square, and Nanjing Road with its flashing neon—sparkling signs announcing Shanghai's re-emergence as a global capital. Living in Shanghai in ensuing years, I observed those cranes swiftly being replaced by towering high-rises and increasing emphases placed on Shanghai's cultural industries amidst the Chinese Communist Party's widespread promotion of soft power.

The name *Shanghai* originated during the Northern Song Dynasty and referred to "a land on the sea."¹ Over the many years I've worked on this book, I have received multiple comments about my title, *Above Sea*. "So poetic," according to a classical Chinese painting specialist. "Awful," said an historian of modern Western European art. A reader of my manuscript wrote, "She puts too much meaning into Shanghai's name. It is after all only a name." Amidst such divided opinion, I would like to state that I am deliberately (and in a Derridean gesture) playing with the Chinese name for Shanghai and my own literal reading of its English translation. My translation of the name of Shanghai undoubtedly influences my interpretations of the city and its culture and will likely influence my English readers' interpretations as well.

When I began research for this book, I received another comment about a name, this time my own in Chinese, Zhenni (珍妮), given to me at birth by my father, Pei-teh Lin. He had migrated first from mainland China to Taiwan

and then to the United States, where he adopted the English name Peter (so foreigners could pronounce it, he's prone to explain). Zhenni means *Precious Pearl* and is partially transliterated from my English name, Jenny. As such, it was deemed unsophisticated and too Americanized by a scholar of Chinese literati painting. "You should think about adopting a different Chinese name," the expert told me, as I began my fieldwork in Shanghai. At first, I considered the suggestion. I even asked the ink painter Wang Dongling, whom I interviewed at Hangzhou's Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, to help me devise a new name; as a result, I have one of his books signed *To Zhenyin* (珍寅). Soon after, a Chinese curator friend in Shanghai and I were talking. "Zhenni is your name!" he exclaimed, "It was given to you. Why would you want to change it?" I considered some of the figures who would appear in my book, such as the modern revolutionary writer Lu Xun, born Zhou Zhangshou, who adopted numerous pennames for fear of being found, persecuted, and prevented from writing. I was reminded of the privilege of maintaining one's name, however inauthentic it may seem. I decided to remain Zhenni not only to my Chinese family and friends but also to all those colleagues and artists in Shanghai who generously opened their homes and studios to me. This book is dedicated to them.

Note

- 1 Niu Ruchen, 中国地名由来词典/*Zhongguo diming youlai cidian/Chinese Placenames Original Dictionary* (Beijing: Central People's University Press, 1999), 106.