***Tess Johnston, Diplomat Who Helped Preserve ‘Old Shanghai,’ Dies at 93.*** By Sam Roberts, *The York Times, 27 Sep 2025*

A person with red glasses and a red scarf

AI-generated content may be incorrect.Lestine Rebecca “Tess” Johnston, a former U.S. foreign service officer who was posted to South Vietnam during the war and documented her experience as a woman there, then spent many years in Shanghai rallying support for the preservation of its vanishing colonial architecture, died on Sept. 14, 2025, in Washington. She was 93.

Her death, from complications of Covid-19 in an assisted living facility, was announced by Tina Kanagaratnam, a founder of the organization Historic Shanghai. Ms. Johnston, Ms. Kanagaratnam and her husband, Patrick Cranley, started the group in 1998, aiming to help safeguard the architecture and culture of Shanghai that predates China’s Communist revolution. In recent years, much of the cityscape has given way to gleaming skyscrapers.

Through her books and lectures, Ms. Johnston called attention to the importance of preserving “the historic city before it changed beyond recognition,” Historic Shanghai said in a statement, adding that “she generously shared her knowledge with a generation of writers, scholars and Shanghailanders.”

Ms. Johnston, who had no formal training in historic preservation, focused on Shanghai’s eclectic colonial architecture — its early-20th-century Spanish villas, onion-domed Russian Orthodox churches and Art Deco structures — all built by expatriates from 1842, when China ceded control of the urban core to the British after the First Opium War, until World War II and the Communist takeover in 1949.

Those structures predominated in the French quarter and peppered the American, Russian and Japanese sections of the city. Ms. Johnston documented the architecture on virtually every street. With the Shanghai photographer Er Dong Qiang (also known as Deke Erh), she published “A Last Look: Western Architecture in Old Shanghai,” the first of her two dozen books on architectural history and walking tours, in 1993.

The first of Ms. Johnston’s many books on Shanghai’s architectural history, published in 1993.Credit...Old China Hand Press

She also recorded oral histories and collected a trove of ephemera — cricket cages, phone books, tables with secret drawers. She later donated her archives to [the Hoover Institution](https://www.hoover.org/news/author-and-former-diplomat-tess-johnston-maps-western-experience-shanghai) at Stanford University.

Ms. Johnston, who spoke fluent Mandarin but never lost her Southern accent — she was born in North Carolina — served at the U.S. Consulate General in Shanghai from 1981 until she retired in 1996. Having grown to love the city, she then decided to remain there. By the time she returned to Washington, in 2016, few if any foreign residents of Shanghai had lived in the city longer than she had.

Of her first impressions of the city, Ms. Johnston [once said](https://www.historic-shanghai.com/tess-johnston-shanghais-preservation-pioneer/): “I had never been to a foreign country that looked so utterly and completely Western. It was perfectly preserved, a cross between Warsaw in 1938 and Calcutta, a totally Western city with an Asian population.”

Because the Communist Party was more concerned with doctrine than demolition, she told The Guardian in 1997: “We have the Cultural Revolution to thank for Shanghai’s preservation. Otherwise, we would be 25 years further down the road. There would be nothing left.”

Still, she said, when she arrived in Shanghai in 1981, the city’s tallest building was 22 stories, and when she left, there were three skyscrapers taller than the Empire State Building.

She documented her experiences working in Vietnam in a 2018 memoir. Credit...via Historic Shanghai

Lestine Rebecca Johnston was born on Sept. 17, 1931, in Charlotte, N.C., the only child of Lester G. Johnston, who sold petroleum products, and Alma (Yoder) Johnston, who oversaw the home. She grew up in Charlottesville, Va.

After graduating from high school, Lestine, who went by Tess, briefly worked for an advertising agency in Richmond, Va. She joined the foreign service in 1953 as a secretary after a relative had tutored her in typing and shorthand.

Ms. Johnston was posted to the American consulate in Düsseldorf, Germany, where she became interested in vintage buildings. She soon returned home to pursue a college degree at the University of Virginia. She wanted to major in architectural history, she said, but found that the subject was not available to undergraduate women. Instead she studied English, history and German literature, earning a bachelor’s degree in education in 1961 and a master’s in German in 1963. She also obtained a master’s degree from the College of William and Mary in 1964.

That same year, she joined the U.S. Agency for International Development in South Vietnam, where she worked as an aide to Wilbur Wilson and John Paul Vann, military advisers to the South Vietnamese Army. She documented her experiences there in “A War Away: An American Woman in Vietnam, 1967-1974,” a 2018 memoir in which she recounted witnessing the Tet offensive by the North Vietnamese and Vietcong in 1968.

Ms. Johnston didn’t hesitate to visit hazardous combat zones. Mr. Vann, she wrote, “loved gutsy females,” and she recalled that when visiting dignitaries were reluctant to accompany him on helicopter tours of the battlefields, he would reply, “My secretaries go out with me all the time.”

(Mr. Vann, who became disillusioned with the war and died in [a helicopter crash](https://www.nytimes.com/1972/06/10/archives/vann-a-top-us-adviser-in-vietnam-dies-in-crash-former-officer-47.html) in South Vietnam in 1972, was profiled by the former New York Times correspondent [Neil Sheehan](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/07/business/media/neil-sheehan-dead.html) in “A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam,” which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1989.)

Following the war, Ms. Johnston rejoined the State Department, serving in New Delhi and Tehran before being transferred to Shanghai in 1981 and named executive secretary to the consul general. Apart from a brief stint in Paris in the late 1980s, she would remain there for 35 years.

Ms. Johnston in 2016, the year she returned to the United States after spending 35 years in Shanghai. Credit...Frank Langfitt

In 1986, she was named Foreign Service Secretary of the Year for her role in coordinating President Ronald Reagan’s visit to Shanghai.

She left no immediate survivors.

While Shanghai has designated hundreds of buildings as historic landmarks since she began her crusade, other Chinese cities were neglecting their heritage, Ms. Johnston told [The New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/1998/03/26/style/IHT-the-vanishing-western-heritage-of-shanghai.html) in 1998.

“What we learn from history,” she said, “is that we don’t learn from history.”

She expressed hope, though, that her books would immortalize Shanghai’s split reputation as “the Paris of the East” and what she called the “wickedest city in the East,” associated with the drugging and kidnapping of American sailors in the 19th century.

“Maybe people will look at our books one day and say, ‘So that’s what China looked like,’” she said.

In her mind’s eye, as well as in her books and the nearly century-old buildings she helped preserve, Shanghai’s past lived on.

“I found on arrival this perfectly preserved Western-looking city sitting here on the improbable shores of China,” she said in an interview with the Shanghai Daily newspaper in 2010.

“Shanghai seems to have something, some mystique that grabs foreigners and makes it hard to leave,” she added. “So I didn’t.”

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