

Shanghai 2020


The City's Vision
for Its Future

Kerry Brown



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Shanghai 2020



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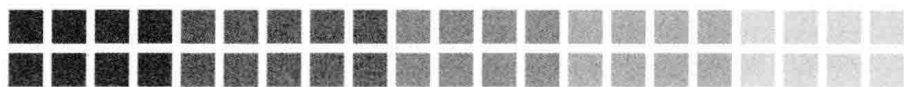
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This is a book about one of the most dynamic, fastest growing cities on earth. It is about a city in a country which is engaging with modernity in ways which have utterly reshaped its economy and society since the start of the reform and opening up process more than three decades ago in 1978. It is about how a place is returning to its historic role as a great crossing point, a window from the world onto China and China onto the world. It is about somewhere where the East meets West, but where the East also meets itself. This is finally the personal story of engagement with the great ambitions of this city, albeit for only a tiny moment of this great story as it unfolds.

Shanghai has been one of the crucibles of Chinese modernity since the end of the 19th century. It grew famous as a place of fashion and excess in the 1920s and 1930s, with figures as disparate as Albert Einstein and Charles Chaplin visiting. It was a place of refuge for Jewish people who managed to arrive there in the Second World War, and became, in those devastating years, one of the battlefronts in the epic fight for national integrity against the Japanese. It was the city in which the first ever Congress of the Communist Party of China was held in 1921, but also the place the Party activists were brutally exiled from in 1927 when the Nationalists undertook a bloody purge. It was this city that Mao Zedong came to, throughout his period as Chairman of the Party from 1949 to 1976, and it was in this city that the

most radical activists of the Cultural Revolution found their base.

Those who come to Shanghai today for the first time have to hold this extraordinary history, with its rich and complex movements and countercurrents, alongside the physical impression of a place which has literally rebuilt and renovated itself in three decades. If any landscape of modern China symbolizes the striving of the whole country around it and its aspirations, it is the skyline of Pudong south of the Huangpu river, seen from beside the historic buildings along the Bund in the north which were constructed in one era of redefinition and rediscovery and are now being remade and renovated for another (this will be described in the first chapter). By the grand old Custom House, once more the headquarters of a bank, visitors can look across over the waters of the river pulsing with goods and passenger ships, to the vast array of skyscrapers the other side. Until 1990, this area was the home of run down warehouses, derelict land, and some agricultural small holdings. But in that year, as this book will explain, the historic decision was made to grant Shanghai the same status as a special economic zone that had seen places like Shenzhen grow from fishing towns of a few tens of thousands of people to cities of over ten million inhabitants.

Making Shanghai a special zone gave the green light to land development, to special policies that allowed the manufacture of goods for export, and to engaging with new processes of economic activity globally which, within a decade, transformed the city physically and socially. By the year in which China entered the World Trade Organisation (WTO), in 2001, Pudong had changed beyond recognition. It had the world's tallest hotel, and some of its biggest skyscrapers, one of which was under construction and which would become, briefly, the world's tallest building. Elsewhere in the city, a deepwater port was being constructed, carrying the city towards fulfilling the aspiration of becoming the world's busiest freight port – an objective that was achieved in 2010. In Lujiazui, the city had constructed a financial district, attracting banks, insurance companies, and multinationals to set up representative offices and joint ventures.

Delegations from around the world, many from the 64 cities with which Shanghai had twinned, came to marvel at this new city being constructed, its population swelling by half a million people a year, as it exploded forward 23 million people by 2012. All of this culminated in the Shanghai Expo held in 2010, an event which saw over 70 million people visit.

Shanghai is a city which is uniquely embracing the challenge of the future. It is doing this through rearticulating its identity as these dynamic changes occur around it, rebranding itself in ways which link its history as a place distinctly Chinese but also international with a vision of what a major city should be in the twenty-first century in the midst of almost constant change. It is a city which links the local with the global in ways which have interest and resonance for other places that also aspire to globalise while maintaining their distinctive character. It is a city therefore which, while learning, also now has much to teach others. This theme of a city constantly on the move but always trying to catch up with itself as it moves swiftly ahead, will return throughout this book.

In trying to understand what is happening in Shanghai and how things might develop in the future is, in many ways, also trying to understand the complexities, ambiguities and challenges facing modern China as it continues along the path of reaching middle income country status by 2020. In per capita terms, Shanghai has already arrived where other places within the country need to go. Its per capita levels of wealth stand in 2012 above ten thousand USD, more than double the national average. It has one of the best healthcare systems, some of the best universities, some of the most innovative companies, and an economy that is quickly moving towards service industry rather than manufacturing. Those that come to the Bund to gaze over the modern skyline of the city often feel like they are looking not just at the present, but at the future, and at what the rest of the country wishes to become in a few years.

This is necessarily a personal account as much as it is a book about a city. Shanghai belongs to anyone who visits the city, and within it

they create narratives of engagement, and links between their own lives and the immense project of the city itself as it moves into the future, carrying aspirations but also fears. I first visited the city as an official from the British government in 1998, fresh from London and working in the Foreign Office. I remember the ways in which, during the evening as people were returning home, Nanjing Street was so clogged with bicycle traffic it was hard to get across the road to the other side. The Bund at that time was only half renovated. There were large areas of the city that were still being replanned. The only airport was the old fashioned and greatly overused Hongqiao. The city's roadwork system was at capacity. Only a couple of metro lines existed.

As a diplomat based in Beijing I had to come to Shanghai often between 2000 and 2003. It was an inevitable part of any VIP itinerary to the country. Dignitaries were taken to look at Pudong, to visit companies which had located in the city, one of the most successful at that time being B&Q, a retailer dealing in household goods which was taking advantage of the boom in house ownership. British companies, along with other European and American ones, flocked to the city, setting up offices, trying to break into the vast Chinese market they were hoping to find spread around them. Every time I visited, I saw more new luxurious hotels spring up. My own favourite, however, remained the old Astor House Hotel, one of the survivors of the late 19th century, sitting in a relatively secluded spot opposite the large Russian consulate by Suzhou River and just along from the Bund. The Astor House hotel underwent extensive renovations in the mid 2000s, and its cool, quiet rooms were places of refuge from the high levels of energy elsewhere in the city. Some of them had the same wooden floors, and the same ambience that must have existed when Premier Zhou Enlai stayed in the hotel before 1949. The old dining hall beyond the dark wooded entry lobby remains a popular place for weddings to this day.

From 2006 to 2010, I was a frequent visitor to the city, and grew far more familiar with it, through working as advisor to the British city

twinned with Shanghai, Liverpool. Liverpool had historic links with Shanghai, and some similarities in terms of its economy and function. It was a port city that had grown wealthy through an explosion of global trade in the late 19th and early 20th century. Like Shanghai, its history had given it a rich legacy of historic buildings put up during this phase of prosperity. Like Shanghai, it had gone through a period of quietness, in which trade had declined and the stock of older buildings fallen into disrepair. And like Shanghai, it was undertaking a new era of renovation and rediscovery of its heritage. There were more specific links. Liverpool is the home of the oldest Chinese community in Europe, from the middle of the 19th century. Many of those who had come to settle in the city were sailors, who had originated from Shanghai. This was formally recognized in 1999 when the two cities signed a twinning arrangement. A Liverpool Shanghai Partnership was subsequently set up, which I ran for four years, and Liverpool, as the culmination of this took a stand at the Shanghai Expo in the Urban Regeneration city area in 2010.

What made the cities different however was simply the scale at which they were doing things. Liverpool had experienced depopulation in the 1960s, as the shipping industry declined and freight traffic went elsewhere. From 700 thousand at its height before the 1940s, the population of the city fell to a little below half a million. For Shanghai, things were different. From the 1970s, its population crept up above ten million, until, by 2012, it had reached 23 million, and was set to be 28 million. Over 12 thousand new people were arriving each week, enough to comfortably create a new Liverpool each year. Shanghai was a city with over 2000 skyscrapers, whereas Liverpool only had a handful. And while Shanghai's ports after the construction of the vast deepwater port in the late 2000s had become the busiest in the world, Liverpool's had stagnated, despite worthy efforts to revitalize the city as a transport hub.

One thing Liverpool did have that resonated with Shanghai's aspirations was a thriving education sector, and a very active regeneration plan. In the areas around the once bereft Albert Docks,

Liverpool had created an exciting and attractive residential and museum zone, with the centerpiece being the Tate Liverpool gallery and the Museum of Slavery. Large parts of the city were redeveloping their remarkable Georgian architecture from a period over 200 years before. The proudest architectural asset of the city were the 'Three Graces,' large buildings sitting on the waterfront, one of which had been the largest concrete construction ever assembled when it had been built in the early 1900s.

Delegations I took to Shanghai from Liverpool often looked at the Bund as somehow being derivative of these buildings. This was based more on emotion than logic. In fact, as this book will show in its chapter on the history of the city, many of the structures that now sit along the Bund predate the Three Graces in Liverpool by many decades. But they belong to a common tradition of international colonial style architecture, and have authentic common links from European schools of architecture. In that sense, they are both great testaments to an earlier period of globalization during one of the most dynamic phases of industrialization and the creation of the modern capitalist economy. There, at least, they can be seen as monuments with a shared root.

The challenge of how Shanghai seeks to respect and stand by its historic roots as a place in which there are some of the world's best and most innovative early industrial buildings and modernist monuments, while also moving towards a future in which there will be enormous pressures on its environment and on the very sustainability of the city is one that will reoccur throughout this book. In many ways, Shanghai's challenge is similar to that of many other cities. It will continue to be pulled on the one hand between moving into a future in which lifestyles and economic trends are very different to that of even the recent past while on the other hand trying to preserve the material remnants of an earlier period and supply some sense of stability and continuity between the two. How does Shanghai fulfill this responsibility of both preserving but also transforming? How does it modernize, but remain true to its historic

roots? This is a fundamental question which will be addressed, in many different sections of this book. These questions are particularly powerful because the impulses of change and modernity in Shanghai are currently perhaps more extreme in degree and scale than any other place in the world. Solving the problems of combining respect for what has been left from the past but also how to create a new city in Shanghai will offer lessons for elsewhere. We can see this as perhaps the fundamental challenge of the city as it moves more deeply into the 21st century.

Shanghai fascinates everyone particularly because it seems to encapsulate the mood and spirit of the whole of China as it continues its grand experiment in reform and change. It's a city that carries meaning and evokes strong responses not just from foreigners, but also from Chinese. In the words of one long term resident of Shanghai originally from the UK interviewed for this book, this is a place not only where 'east meets west' but also where 'east meets east.'¹ The city physically embodies the dynamism of China's vision of modernity, and the vivid impact this has on people when they first encounter the new and evolving skyline of Pudong is memorable. In 2012 alone, in two major Hollywood films, *Skyfall*, the latest in the 007 James Bond series and *Looper*, key scenes were set in Shanghai. In the first, Bond tracks down an assassin linked to a global criminal who has come to Shanghai to execute a target in one of the floors of an immense new skyscraper in the city centre. In *Looper*, the character played by Bruce Willis finds himself in the city thirty years from today, a telling indication of how, in much popular western imagination, Shanghai is linked to futurism rather than just modernity. The city's attributes in this film of flashing neon lights and powerful modern skyscraper architecture however are very similar to what a visitor would find already exist in the real city today.

The American based economist Yasheng Huang in his *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics* states that 'Nowhere else in the world

1. Interview, Shanghai, November 2012