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CITY B190

Reflecting Modernity: Examining the Skyline of Pudong in Shanghai, China

A city's skyline is a spectacle: it, as a product of the political and economic forces that have shaped the city, acts to represent through its architecture, material construction, and functionality the values said forces wish to see the city itself embody and attract. The imposing skyline of the rapidly-developing Pudong district in Shanghai, as the visual symbol of an area intensively developed by both the local and national governments in recent years, is a particularly relevant illustration of the role of a skyline and its larger impacts. By comparing and contrasting the larger socioeconomic and political context and physical skyline of the Pudong region in two different time periods— the early 1970s, a period where Shanghai had turned inward with the rest of the country and the skyline across the city stalled, and the present day, which boasts a Shanghai highly visible on both the world stage as a technological and financial center and in physical space with the hypermodernization of Pudong— the massive transformation undergone by the area and the reasons behind that transformation become visible. Because, whether or not this is considered by those who constructed it, the role of a skyline is to act as a symbol of the city itself, the impacts of the Pudong skyline's scale, modernity, and breakneck construction are a reflection of the change in the values that the city and national government wish to see Shanghai represent to the international community. That reflection, in turn, attempts to bring wealth into the city.

The image of a skyline is a powerful tool of communication, giving an onlooker their first impression of the city itself and acting as a visual representation of the collective entity that is the city. It can serve to announce wealth, reflect aspirations of modernity, call back to a larger cultural heritage, pay homage to organizations or figures, or create an inviting landscape for visitors, among a variety of other functions, all of which are essential in communicating to the outside world what is important to and within the city. Any of these functions can be carved into a skyline through the design and construction of the buildings that compose it. While architectural style, sustainability, and usage of a building can all be used to reflect a function, height and iconicity are especially important to clients building with their city's skyline in mind (Al-Kodmany, 15):

In today's globalized world, competition among nations and cities vying for supremacy has increased the demand for ultra-tall buildings. Major cities compete to earn the distinction of having the tallest building and thus proclaim their confidence, scientific achievement, and economic prosperity. Cities increasingly desire to have not only the tallest, but also the most iconic tall building with which to define their new reality in the world. Iconic tall buildings can bestow instant fame upon cities, improving the regeneration and "re-imaging" of their economic conditions (Young et al., 2006). Political leaders often support the development of tall buildings as a way to enter the global economy, attract resources and investment, and leave an impression on the urban landscape (Madanipour, 2006; Strange and Whitney, 2003).

This surge of interest in building scale lends itself naturally to the rise of skyscrapers, which in particular serve as "monuments of modernity"-- iconic features of a skyline that announce a city and country's successful path forward into the future (Damisch, 81-83). As cities, sporting rapidly-growing populations and becoming key spaces of international deal- and

decision-making in a rapidly globalizing world, become even more prominent players in global politics and the world economy, the necessity of creating and maintaining a visually impactful skyline that communicates the desired ideas to a viewer becomes ever more pressing to policymakers and planners in order to ensure that their city successfully competes with others (Madanipour, 180; Sassen, 13). Shanghai, a city where nearly a quarter of its 165 billion-yuan budget was spent on capital construction as of 2005, is one keenly invested in its skyline (Gil, 125, citing National Bureau of Statistics of China, table 8.15).

Before examining the physical development of the overall city and Pudong specifically, it is necessary to understand the historical circumstances that gave rise to that development. Shanghai has been a center of international commerce for centuries as a port city providing a point of intersection between overland and maritime trade. Forcibly opened up to trade with the West after the First Opium War, it quickly became “the center of China’s import-export trade, the gateway providing access to the wider world and the beachhead of Western influence in the Manchu empire” (Bergère, 37). After the 1911 Revolution, the city began to transition into an industrial powerhouse and financial hub in its own right, an economic boom brought on by the competing European halt of production and economic downturn from World War I as well as the waning of Chinese state authority in the 1920s accelerating this growth and tripling the city’s population by the mid-1930s.

This growth was interrupted by the onset of World War II and subsequent rise of the new national government in 1949, which ushered in “a long period of disfavor” (*Ibid.*, 45) lasting until the beginning of the Reform era in 1979 in which the city was fully absorbed into the isolated Maoist economy in an effort to transform it into a “[center] of production that would

serve the general populace” (Perry, 105): the nationalization or halt of existing economic activities shifted the city away from finance and business operations and toward heavy industry (Bergère, 40-45), and most of the value produced by the city was extracted, with “fully 87 percent of the revenues produced locally [being] sent to the Central Government in Beijing to pay for other regional programs of industrialization and development” (Rowe, 54).

However, national policy quickly reversed after Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978 and kickstarted a series of reforms aiming to restructure the Chinese economy around a market system; Shanghai, as a historically productive coastal city, was one of the first to be opened to foreign investment and trade (Britannica). By the 1990s, the progression of marketization nationally allowed for the increasing privatization of housing and real estate in the city along with other industries, buffeted by a succession of city mayors who eased the city into a state of semi-independence from Beijing to reduce income extraction and sought to promote intensive development in specific areas of the city. The establishment of the Pudong New Area in 1993 incited a new round of development concentrated across the river (Rowe, 54-56). Pudong has expanded so drastically since that the area once considered the city of Shanghai is now known as Puxi (west of the Huangpu River) to distinguish it from Pudong, “[making Shanghai-Puxi] symmetrical with Shanghai-Pudong” (Bergère, 36).

By observing the sociological, economic, and political progression of the city, the underlying context of the extreme differences in the urban landscape of Pudong between the early 1970s and present can be discerned. The Shanghai of the early 1970s was the product of several decades under a highly centralized command economy in which the wealth and production generated by it and similarly thriving towns and cities in China were utilized in a state campaign to modernize the entire nation by redirecting resources from productive areas

toward the development of others. Its priorities as a city, though imposed from above, were the advancement of the rest of the country primarily through industrial production. The modern Shanghai, on the other hand, is the result of the policy changes of the Reform era and subsequent privatization and opening up of the Chinese economy: it now seeks to stay competitive with other prominent global markets in key industries like finance and technology “that will contribute to the prosperity of a postindustrial future” (Yusuf and Nabeshima, 62). Though governance of the city has been somewhat restored to local administrators, its current priorities are still consistent with that of the national government, which now attempts to develop the country as a whole through the economic advancement of key cities instead of systematic wealth extraction and redistribution.

The urban explosion of Pudong after the 1990s is especially notable when viewed in the context of its previous development, which remained astoundingly static for almost a century despite multiple fruitless proposals by various local administrations to develop the region beyond using it as a site for agriculture and industrial workers’ housing, with plans for harbors and extensions of the city routinely falling flat as the area remained “Shanghai’s poorest suburb” (Denison and Ren, 215-216). This lack of development was strikingly visible in Pudong’s urban form. In the early 1970s, the skyline of the district was as it had been since roughly the 1920s: “a vast expanse of rice paddies and low-rise concrete buildings” (Pridmore, 61). Kuan (89-90) notes its long-term subordination to Puxi:

That the center of Shanghai has held steadfast to the west bank of the Huangpu is remarkable for its stubborn longevity. The old walled city of Shanghai was on the west bank, and the foreign concessions grew adjacent to it on the same side of the river. During the Treaty-Port era, buildings on Pudong were limited to a few wharfs and

warehouses, along with shanty dwellings for dockworkers. Foreign traders and Chinese compradors were content to stay on the west bank, gazing from their offices on the Bund into a horizon of rice paddies on the far side of the river.

For all intents and purposes, before the city's later economic takeoff, the skyline of Puxi constituted the skyline of Shanghai itself— the appearance of Pudong across the river was not even in the equation when one was put to the task of identifying the city, considered “the poor cousin of Shanghai” and “a bumpkin backwater” (Qian). Though it is often described as the closest to a *tabula rasa* that an urban planner could hope for (Denison and Ren, 219), the construction of Pudong was not without its casualties: the farmhouses and industrial barracks that had existed before the area was slated for redevelopment had to be demolished in order to furnish space for new buildings (see Fig. 1).

To a visitor who had last seen it in the mid-1970s, the Pudong of today would be unrecognizable, a product of explosive development beginning with its 1990s development boom (see Fig. 2) and the current subject of government measures seeking to more closely connect the city to its central river. In the infancy of the Pudong New Area, the administration of Shanghai mayor Zhu Rongji initially sought to capture international attention for the district by holding a competition for its plan featuring four high-profile architects from around the world, with the financial district of Lujiazui at the plan’s center. However, it quickly became apparent that the development of the area was already too well underway to impose a single coherent architecture for the entire urban form: local officials were eager to let investors from abroad claim real estate space and build as they desired, creating a skyline dominated by unique high-rises intended to make a statement (Pridmore, 61-65; Denison and Ren, 215-219)— a pedestrian will quickly find that “architectural periodisation is completely meaningless [in Shanghai]... in the skyline, [one]

can pick out everything from historicism to pomo to Constructivism to Expressionism to serene Miesian Modernism, with the only logic seeming to be that rather chaotic notion of Harmony and Pluralism” (Hatherly). Rowe (62) notes that “each tower seems to vie with others for attention and some even appear outlandish in the arbitrariness of their expressive form”. Some notable examples of the architecture spawned by the rush of construction in the 1990s include: the 1999 China Insurance Building (see Fig. 3), which consists of two cylindrical towers capped by antennae on wheel-like pedestals; the 1996 King Tower (see Fig. 4), where a steel spire swoops out of a puzzle of blue-tinted glass, culminating in a massive glass overhang at its base; the emerald green 1995 China Merchants Tower (see Fig. 5), which four towers protruding from a central cylinder with a conical roof; the 1995 Oriental Pearl Tower (see Fig. 6), which remains among the most recognizable parts of the Pudong silhouette with a construction that recalls the designs of early science fiction; and the 1999 Jin Mao Tower (see Fig. 7), which commands attention from its height rather than its design, having been the tallest building in the country at the time it was commissioned by a group of firms heavily backed by the Chinese central government (Pridmore, 21; 61-68).

However, this span of time, alternatively considered a “rococo period of postmodernism” (Pridmore, 65) or the birthplace of “a grisly spectacle of brash and irrelevant structures whose sole yet empty claim was their height” (Denison and Ren, 218) has shifted over the past few decades into an appreciation for the modernist idea of function over form, with today’s clients opting for more restrained styles (*Ibid.*, 86). For example, the 2004 General Motors Building (see Fig. 8) features a more humanist bent, with its smaller scale and surrounding green space contrasting the design tastes of its more theatrical surroundings. The 2005 Shanghai Municipal Electric Power Building (of which there are no photos licensed to be reproduced) continues this

trend with a more sparing design, its “one subtle element of symbolism [being] the bluish green glass, intended to signify harmony with the earth and sky” (Pridmore, 86). A possible indication of the future of architecture in the area may lie in the supertall Shanghai Tower (see Fig. 9), which was topped off in 2013. With a sleek, sustainable design that twists into the sky, looming over Pudong as the tallest building in the city, the structure seeks to emphasize the modern future of both Shanghai and China (AZO Build):

“Shanghai Tower represents a new way of defining and creating cities,” said Art Gensler, FAIA, Founder of Gensler [the building’s design firm]. “By incorporating best practices in sustainability and high-performance design, by weaving the building into the urban fabric of Shanghai and drawing community life into the building, Shanghai Tower redefines the role of tall buildings in contemporary cities and raises the bar for the next generation of super-highrises.”

Most recently, the municipal government has introduced a plan to redevelop the Huangpu waterfront for civic use in order to connect the city to the river at its present-day center and improve the image of a hallmark of Shanghai: among the changes and renovations planned are a movement of ports to the Changjiang, a renewal of the area around Suzhou Creek (which flows into the Huangpu), and the construction of parks and transportation lines over and around the Huangpu to encourage the interconnection of Puxi and Pudong (Marshall, 160-170). With all of these activities taking place within a period of time spanning just under three decades, the recent history of Pudong is the history of one of the world’s most ambitious urban planning schemes.

Previously the marker of an area more or less vestigial to the rest of the city, Pudong’s skyline has developed radically since the 1970s through the intensive intervention of city and national governments in the development of Shanghai, offering a space for the ambitions of

officials seeking to “renovate, upgrade and build anew in their quest to make Shanghai a global city” (Marshall, 160) and “[construct] for [the city’s] inhabitants a metropolis that will take its place among the most “modernized” cities of the world” (Perry, 108). It is important to view this reconstruction as a product of combined local, national, and global forces and not what Kloet and Scheen (16) call a “teleological march towards a form of modernity”. The reasoning behind this heavy investment is the intention to capitalize on the city as a potential center of global trade, technological innovation, and other tertiary and quaternary sectors— for it “to have the dual purpose of becoming a display case for domestic products and services, as well as an attraction for international economic resources” (Rowe, 57; see Fig. 10). Wu (as quoted in Barr and Luo, 215) points out that “Shanghai’s rise in an era of globalization is seen as a process of transforming a Third World city into a global city—a converging process toward the ‘favored few’—New York, London, Tokyo—that have acquired large economic, cultural and symbolic roles”. Once turned inward to contribute its might as an urban center to the larger internal aspirations of the Chinese state, the city now faces outward toward the rest of the world in order to both act as a symbol of its own as well as Chinese modernity and capture external attention, investment, and business from abroad, an effort that has thus far found great success: “more [foreign direct investment] flows into Shanghai alone than into any other developing country every year, twice the amount invested in the whole of India” (Chen, XV). The development of a recognizable, imposing, and modern city skyline to identify the city is a key part of this effort.

A city skyline serves as a symbol of an entity that can only truly be conceived of in the abstract: the daily life, culture, history, and business of the collective population living within that city. The aspirations of this collective can be realized physically in the ideas reflected by the

scale and design of the skyline, something aptly realized within the last several decades in the city of Shanghai, especially when examining the area of Pudong. With a history as an extremely productive port connecting China to global trade routes, the modern city of Shanghai is seeking to reclaim its former status as an international metropolis after several decades of conversion under the national leadership of Mao Zedong into an industrial hub functioning primarily to support larger projects of the state. A key part of this strategy is the development of the Pudong district, which, among other efforts, has entailed the promotion by the local government of Shanghai and national government of China of intensive construction and investment by both domestic and international clients. The Pudong skyline has, as a result, grown in just a few decades from that of a historically undeveloped region with a lack of visual hallmarks into a sprawling, high-density landscape equipped with iconic architectural signifiers of modernity in the form of unique skyscrapers and a highly-planned waterfront serving to connect the old city of Shanghai-Puxi to its new extension in Shanghai-Pudong. This growth is a visual manifestation of the combined efforts of the city and national governments to showcase the city's economic status and modernity in a global market, turning Pudong into a beacon of the city that attempts to both reflect the city and state's politico-economic power outward to the rest of the world and draw global capital inward.

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APPENDIX



Fig. 1. Hoffman, Fritz. *A razed neighborhood at the base of the Jin Mao Tower*. Photograph, 1997, <https://www.chinafile.com/photo-gallery/building-icon>.



Fig. 2. von Graffenried, Dieter. *The View from Shanghai across the River to Pudong in 1976 (at Right) and 2017 (at Left)*. Photograph,
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Fig. 3. Janberg, Nicholas. Shanghai - China Insurance Building. Photograph, 9 May 2009,

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Fig. 4. 江上清风. *King Tower*. Photograph, 21 Aug. 2010,

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Fig. 5. Janberg, Nicholas. *Shanghai - China Merchants Tower*. Photograph, 9 May 2009,

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Fig. 6. Janberg, Nicholas. *Pearl of the Orient*. Photograph, 9 May 2009,

<https://structurae.net/en/structures/oriental-pearl-radio-television-tower>.



Fig. 7. Griffith, Tim. *Jin Mao Tower*. Photograph, <https://www.som.com/projects/jin-mao-tower/>.



Fig. 8. McMaster, Philip. *Shanghai General Motors Building, Pudong, China* _3069. 17 July 2009, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dragonpreneur/3729663503/>.



Fig. 9. Wikipedia user Baycrest. *Shanghai Tower, Tallest Building in China (Architect: Jun Xia @ Gensler)*. Photograph, 2015,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shanghai_Tower_2015.jpg.



Fig. 10. Hoffman, Fritz. *Government Propaganda in Pudong near Lujiazui*. Photograph, 1996,

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