Shanghai – City of Multiple Viewpoints

Anne Warr
Image-making and nation-building have been integral to Shanghai’s growth as a city from the nineteenth century though to the twenty-first century. This essay explores four key periods in the city’s history that have contributed to the image of the city as it is today. These key periods are: the Taiping Rebellion 1853-1864, the Nanjing Decade 1927-1937, the Maoist Period 1949-1976, and Post-Mao Capitalist-Communism 1976 onwards. Each of these key periods was underpinned by political ideology related to China’s view of itself in relation to the world, and each period has resulted in unique built forms that have contributed to the city’s self-image today.

Before the defeat of China by the British in the First Opium War of 1842, the trading city of Shanghai had been relatively unimportant in the hierarchy of Chinese cities and had changed very little from the time the city wall was completed in 1554 (Wei 1987: 11). During the hundred years of foreign concessions in Shanghai, from 1843 until the handing back of the concessions to China in 1943, the city changed dramatically. By 1920, the original walled city

![Figure 1: Land Values Map of Shanghai, 1929, showing small circle of Chinese city surrounded by the extensive development of the foreign concessions. (Source: Shanghai Library)]
was hardly discernable as it became surrounded and diminished by the Western architecture and city planning of the International Settlement and French Concession (see Figure 1). The wall itself was removed in 1911 by Chinese merchants, wishing to both celebrate the new republic of China and to improve their commerce by integrating with the foreign concessions (Wei 1987: 12). By 1934, Shanghai was one of the great metropoles of the world, with a population of 3 million, of whom 70,000 were foreigners, and more tall buildings than any other city in Asia. Shanghai was notable as being a Western city with Western architecture set in the midst of China.

The destabilising effect of foreigners in China was felt from the moment the British, then Americans and French, claimed territorial concessions from the Chinese after 1842. The loss of more territory following China’s defeat in the Second Opium War of 1860, the defeat by Japan in the Sino-Japanese war of 1895 and the ceding of German concessions in Shandong province to the Japanese after the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, led to a series of anguished attempts by the Chinese to maintain their identity and self-image as Zhonghuo – the country at the centre of the world.

The Taiping Rebellion 1853-1864 – The Creation of the Shanghai lilong

As the stability of foreign rule in Shanghai made it the centre of foreign commerce in China, it also undermined the power of the already weak Qing dynasty and led the rest of the country into political chaos. In 1853 when rebellious peasants known as Taiping captured the city of Nanjing and devastated the surrounding countryside killing as many as 20 million Chinese, thousands of landed gentry fled to the safety of Shanghai’s foreign enclaves. The regulation forbidding Chinese from residing in the Foreign Concessions was soon overlooked by both sides as the influx of refugees rose to 20,000 by 1864 (Lu 1999: 139). When it seemed that the emergency situation might become permanent, the International Hongs, like Jardine Mathieson and Gibb Livingston, began to build accommodation for the refugees. Whole city blocks were purchased and developed into a unique form of housing comprising a wall of shop-houses on the periphery guarding a grid of lanes within, lined with rows of English style tenement terraces. To make these dense living quarters palatable to the Chinese gentry, diminutive Chinese courtyards were added, accessed through pairs of black timber doors framed by stone portals – called shikumen. Cleverly integrating east and west, the housing blocks, known as a ‘lilong’ or ‘longtang’. \( (l_i = \text{neighbourhood}, \ l_o = \text{lane}, \ t_o = \text{interior space}, \ shikumen = \text{stone gate} ) \) were soon being replicated all over Shanghai. By 1940, three quarters of Shanghai’s 4.2 million population lived in some form of lilong. The lilong provided the majority of Shanghai’s with accommodation right through to the 1990s when Shanghai’s development boom saw many
lilong razed for high rise development. However, by 2005, Shanghai’s progressive government had enacted conservation legislation to protect all remaining lilong (see Figure 2). More than any other building form in Shanghai, the lilong encapsulates the unique intertwining of Chinese and western life that has taken place since the signing of the Opium Treaty in 1842. Today, the quintessential image that encapsulates Shanghai is one showing a low-rise lilong contrasted with the high-rise twenty-first city behind (see Figure 3).

The Nanjing Decade 1927-1937 – Nation Building and Nationalist Architecture

The overthrow of the Qing Dynasty by the Chinese people in 1911 ushered in a short period of rule by the first President of the People’s Republic of China, Sun Yat-sen, followed by a longer period of warlord control and instability. When Chiang Kai-shek was proclaimed Generalissimo and head of the Guomintang (Nationalist) Government in 1927, he ushered in a period of relative stability and nation-building for China known as the Nanjing Decade. Chiang sought to rebuild the stature of China by employing a combination of Eastern cultural essence with practical Western technology, known as the ti-yong combination. Chiang stipulated that all public buildings in the Chinese municipality of Shanghai should employ not only the ‘scientific principles developed from Europe and America’ but also the ‘excellent aspects of the artistic tradition of our nation’ (Tong 1937: 308). In Shanghai, the best example of the ti-yong nation-building style can be seen at Wujiangchang located to the north of the foreign concessions along the Huangpu River. Between 1932 and 1936, when work stopped due to the invading Japanese, the planned new city of Jiangwan had been laid out and a number of public buildings erected in the ti-yong style – the Civic Centre, Museum, Library, Hospital and sporting complex (see Figure 4). The importance of the Jiangwan planning scheme of the Nationalist Decade and its accompanying hybrid architecture in promoting the growing Chinese nationalism has been widely studied post-2000 as a means of understanding the Chinese modern identity as it emerged during the twentieth century. In 2004, when the Shanghai government announced the creation of 12 Conservation Areas, Jiangwan was one of the designated protected areas, despite having been a creation of the now exiled Guomintang Government, once the staunch enemy of the Communist party.

The Maoist Period 1949-1976 – Preservation by Default and Through Heroism

During the period from 1949-1976, now referred to as the Maoist period, very little changed, physically, in the city of Shanghai. Very few new buildings were constructed, and the city’s growing population learned to adapt to smaller and smaller sized accommodation, as single-family dwellings were sub-divided for more and more families. Residences originally designed for a single family might accommodate up to 50 people, with one family per room. The public buildings from the foreign concessions, such as hospitals, schools, police stations and fire stations were pragmatically adapted for similar uses, with very little built fabric being destroyed. Apartment buildings such as The Dubail (constructed 1931) were sub-divided internally and had
an extra floor added as a seamless addition (see Figure 5). In fact, the miracle of the post-1949 era in Shanghai is that so many early twentieth century buildings survived, something unlikely to have happened in a market-driven economy subject to development pressures.

The destruction during the Maoist period came as a result of the ideology of the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976, when symbols of bourgeoisie living, or of Western imperialism, such as churches, stained glass windows and elaborate decorative items were symbolically desecrated or destroyed. However, many heroic stories of Shanghai people protecting Western cultural items from destruction have emerged in the post-Mao era. Although the spires and stained glass windows of the Xujiahui Catholic cathedral (constructed 1910) were destroyed in 1966, the spires were reconstructed in 1982 and the 500 stained glass windows are currently undergoing a process of replacement – fabricated and designed by Chinese nuns. The adjacent Jesuit library, containing over 20,000 volumes of pre-1949 texts collected by the Jesuit priests would have suffered similar destruction by Red Guard but for a determined group of Shanghai academics and intellectuals who barred their way, risking their lives. Today, the library operates as a sub-branch of the Shanghai Library, making these historic texts available to scholars.

**Post Mao Capitalist-Communism – Better City, Better Life**

In 1992, when the new leader of the People’s Republic of China, Deng Xiaoping, officially called for Shanghai to become the ‘head of the dragon’ and to lead regional and economic development under China’s socialist market system, Shanghai’s city planners were ready to take on the challenge. The age-old trading city of Shanghai had been lying dormant for too long. It was time for Shanghai to become the imagined city of China’s future. What would this future city look like? Would it include the foreign-style architecture from the period of the foreign concessions in China, 1842-1943, or would the imagined city of the future obliterate the unacceptable past – both that of the colonial and Guomingtang governments?

Shanghai’s city authorities had been preparing plans for the envisioned new city of Shanghai since the mid-1980s, principally for expansion of the city across the Huangpu River into Pudong. Deng’s 1992 speech meshed well with the existing city plans by introducing a series of official measures to stimulate development including the creation of a new economic zone at Lujiazui in Pudong which included incentives for foreign investors. Whether intentionally or not, the new economic zone not only allowed for Shanghai’s vision of a futuristic city to take shape, but allowed much of the historic city, including the former commercial centre along the British Bund, to remain intact.

In 1995, the first tall structure in the new city of Lujiazui, The Oriental Pearl Tower designed by the East China Architecture and Design Institute (ECADI), was completed. The space age imagery of the communications tower combined with Chinese symbolism captured the mood of Shanghai at the beginning of the ‘90s – full of hopeful expectation for the future of the city. And the tower, strategically located at the tip of the promontory, did indeed seem to spearhead
the development that rapidly followed in Lujiazui, the new financial centre of Shanghai. Five years later in 2000, the Jin Mao Tower was completed – announcing the arrival of the sophisticated twenty-first century. Although designed by foreign architects, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), the tower was proudly Chinese in imagery, not space-age, alluding to the eleventh century Kaifeng Pagoda pagoda with its 13 flared set-backs. By 2008, the World Financial Centre, designed by Kohn Pedersen Fox (KPF) was complete, and in 2015, the last of the three planned tall commercial towers for Lujiazui will be finished – the Shanghai Tower designed by Gensler Architects (see Figure 6).

In Lujiazui, the tall towers epitomised the government’s quest for symbols and an international image, while across the Huangpu River to the West, where the original walled Chinese city stood, as well as the twentieth-century foreign concessions, a different urban landscape was maturing – one which integrated old and new. In 1991, the year before Deng’s famous speech, a group of Shanghai intellectuals, concerned about the possible loss of Shanghai’s heritage in the quest for economic development, was preparing plans for the preservation of the best of Shanghai’s architecture, including that of the foreign concessions in the twentieth century. In 1993, the first list of Shanghai’s Municipal Preserved Architecture, backed by strong legislation, was promulgated. The list of 398 municipally protected buildings included all the early twentieth century buildings along the Bund, as well as 1930s apartment blocks and some grand villas. By 2003, the Shanghai Municipal Government laid down regulations requiring each sub-district to prepare its own list of significant sites, with Xu Hui district being the first to publish a list of 10 preserved buildings, and to attach informative, bi-lingual, plaques to each building. Not long after, in October 2005, the Shanghai Municipal Government announced the creation of 12 conservation areas covering 27 square kilometres of Shanghai, and the intention of preparing Conservation Plans for each. These areas are:

1. The Bund
2. Old Shanghai town (part of the original Chinese walled city)
3. People’s Square
4. Hengshan Road/Fuxing Road
5. Nanjing Road West
6. Yuyuan Road
7. Xinhua Road
8. Shanyin Road
9. Tilanqiao (The former Jewish Ghetto)
10. Jiangwan
11. Longhua (location of the Longhua Temple)
12. Hongqiao Road.

Figure 6: Shanghai 2014 showing from left, the World Financial Centre, Jin Mao Tower, Shanghai Tower under construction and Oriental Pearl Tower. (Source: Yolanda vom Hagen)
Individually listed heritage items have restrictions applied to the interior as well as the exterior, while buildings within conservation zones have restrictions applied only to the exterior. Development controls restrict new construction within conservation zones to ensure that the aesthetic characteristics of the conservation zones are maintained. Far from restricting development, the municipally preserved buildings, now exceeding 1,500 in number, as well as the 12 conservation zones, are adding richness to the urban grain of the city. In a country well-trained in hierarchical government with unchallengeable rules – the heritage protection measures have been well respected.

In 2002, when the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) announced that Shanghai – the first Asian city to be awarded such an honour – had won the right to host the 2010 World Expo, Shanghai began preparing the city for its estimated 80 million visitors. With the slogan ‘Better City Better Life’, the EXPO authorities were determined to prove that Shanghai as a whole would indeed be a better city providing a better life for its inhabitants by 2010. The EXPO programs included an expansion of the metro system from 2 lines to 12 lines making it the 4th largest metropolitan rail system in the world; greening of the city to ensure a greater per capita green space; the creation of ‘One hundred cultural centres’ by 2010; and an upgrading of historic buildings which included external painting, removal of unsightly air-conditioning units, and maintenance of communal foyers. For the Shanghai authorities, EXPO 2010 was to be much more than a world fair; it was to be an opportunity to showcase the whole city, as described by Tongji Professor and Urbanist, Zheng Shiling:

The EXPO 2010 will speed up the globalisation, modernisation and urbanisation of Shanghai. What the EXPO will exhibit is not only the things exhibited in the pavilions, Shanghai city itself will also be exhibited (Zheng 2003: 12).

Conclusion – Image-making

This essay has briefly explored four key periods in Shanghai’s history that have contributed to the city’s built heritage and thus to the city’s self-image today. The response of foreign business houses to the plight of Chinese gentry escaping the Taiping Rebellion between 1853 and 1864 led to the creation of Shanghai’s unique residential form – the *lilong*. The Guomintang government’s quest to strengthen China’s identity during the period of the foreign concessions led to the creation of a unique form of nationalist architecture showcased at Wujiaochang and now celebrated as one of Shanghai’s 12 conservation areas. The period of Maoist Communism, while creating few new buildings, ensured the protection of a majority of Shanghai’s twentieth century architecture, where a market-driven economy might have seen their destruction. During the Cultural Revolution, Shanghaiese bravely protected significant items of Western architecture or later reconstructed elements that had been desecrated. And finally, the post-Mao period has managed to protect much of Shanghai’s built heritage through the development of a separate economic zone at Lujiazui and by recognizing the importance of its historic buildings as one of the factors ensuring a ‘Better City Better Life’ for the city in the lead-up to EXPO 2010.

As a trading destination for foreigners and Chinese merchants from all over China for more than a thousand years, Shanghai has learned to adapt to, and accommodate, multiple visitors and multiple viewpoints. It is a city that has welcomed the new and as such has allowed each of the city’s distinct phases to leave an imprint on the city’s built form that today is respected and protected. It is a city with an architectural legacy unlike any other.

Acknowledgment

Photographs of Shanghai 2014 are by Shanghai-based photographer, Yolanda vom Hagen (www.yovohagrafie.de).
References


Deng, M. 1992, Survey of Shanghai from 1840s – 1940s, Shanghai Renmin Meishun, Shanghai.

Denison, E & Guang, Y.R. 2006, Building Shanghai, Wiley-Academy, Chichester.


Wei, B. 1987, Shanghai, Crucible of Modern China, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong.