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Rambling Notes: Tracing “Old Shanghai” at the Futuristic Heart of “New China”

Niv Horesh

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By Niv Horesh

Shanghai is in many ways the face of the new People’s Republic. Even as the city has been remade in recent decades, efforts are underway to selectively salvage what remains of its pre-war architectural heritage (1842-1937) and many of its archival records are becoming accessible to foreign researchers. Touted as Asia’s biggest and most cosmopolitan urban centre in the pre-war era, Shanghai has (re)emerged over the last two decades as “a harbinger of China’s future and a testing ground for the world at large.”

It is therefore worth reprising Shanghai’s distant treaty-port past not just as tourist-trivia pursuit: the past also offers a perspective from which to observe the imminent rise of the city to global prominence.

Memory Lane

One of few exhilarating privileges Shanghai history buffs can nowadays enjoy is staying at the city’s oldest-running hotel, the tactfully-refurbished Astor House (est. 1846), near Suzhou Creek. In its heyday, The Astor hosted luminaries like US President Ulysses S. Grant, Charlie Chaplin, Guglielmo Marconi, Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, and even Zhou Enlai. A 15-minute walk due south, along the ceaselessly re-vamped Bund is the Shanghai Municipal Archives. There, history buffs can relish on demand letters written by the managers of the very same Astor over a century ago, complaining to the foreign-run Shanghai Municipal Council about “natives,” “coolies” and “rickshaws” making too much noise for patrons to bear.

Returning to the Astor from the Archives, history buffs cannot but note that road hazards and noise are still a feature of the hotel environment; however, Santanas have by now supplanted rickshaws as the most common means of transport, and whites no longer run the municipal council. Neither is there a sign of Shanghai’s once ubiquitous double-deckers and trams, though Soviet-style electric-powered buses still ply the routes between the Bund and Nanjing Road. Back in the 1940s Shanghai’s traffic
amenities fired up rustic imagination, with newly-imported American automobiles and regular flights serving the high-heeled between the city and Hong Kong, as was beautifully captured in Eileen Chang’s classic screenplay Taitai wansui. The comparable traffic novelty at present is the fact that one can, as of this year, board direct flights from Pudong International Airport to Taipei after decades of cross-strait political chill.

China’s relative openness is evident elsewhere too. Official mouthpieces like the China Daily unabashedly carry the occasional translated op-ed piece from Japan’s Asahi Shinbun. And against the backdrop of a global financial crisis, the local press is explicitly calling for a more transparent central-government stimulus package to the provinces, warning that such ad hoc funding might be siphoned off by corrupt officials.

This openness can also be felt in any Shanghai bookshop one walks into: Nobel prize winner Gao Xingjian’s titles are still off limits, but one does find a local variant of Obamania with the First Lady’s translated biography selling fast alongside localized editions of anything from Forbes to Marie Claire; DVDs of American sitcoms like Friends; scores of yoga exercise books; European classics from Dickens to Zola. Even the flippant Lonely Planet travel guides are on offer in Chinese, though the LP volume on the PRC itself presumably contained too much politically sensitive commentary to be approved by censors. The sheer variety of printed matter is such that one is even tempted for a second to comb shelves for a Chinese novel of Slumdog Millionaire appeal, only to realize that such searing social critique of the inequalities attending “emerging economies” clearly cannot be accommodated even in this era of PRC openness.

As Jeff Wasserstrom described in his Japan Focus article (“Red Shanghai, Blue Shanghai”), the hype surrounding Shanghai is set to peak during Expo 2010 with the inauguration of a huge pavilion and bridge complex in Pudong combining traditional Chinese motifs and the last word in urban design. Already, visitors cannot but marvel at Shanghai’s cityscape, which is rapidly being transformed, while preservation of pre-war architecture is almost inevitably taking the back seat. Unlike Beijing, where the global economic turnaround has cast a pall over the Olympics construction frenzy, leaving much office space practically empty — high-rise construction in Shanghai still seems in full swing, presumably in anticipation that demand will hold as the city prepares for Expo 2010. The official press is buoyant, but elsewhere pundits talk of a major glut and impending price collapse. What will happen the day after Expo 2010 closes is anyone’s guess.

Skyscrapers have by now popped up well beyond the pre-war city perimeters. The suburb of Jiangwan, for example, had remained all but a ghost-town on the northern outskirts, even as the KMT was trying to turn it into the city’s new civic center in the late 1930s. The KMT-built Jiangwan stadium, once Asia’s largest white elephant, and the eerily empty civic library are still there. But the suburb has reinvented itself as a hi-tech and tertiary-education powerhouse where Oracle’s China headquarters, amongst other multinationals, are located.

The North-eastern suburb of Wusong, on the mouth of the Huangpu River, was until the 1980s a sparsely-populated (though strategically important) frontier. It is now a crowded mesh of maritime warehouses and shopping malls. The local Qing-era cannon platform (Wusong paotai) is the only reminder of the old frontier. The real frontier nowadays is South-western suburbia where Disney-fied compounds are being built for the nouveau riche; there is now a huge gated community with perfectly Victorian streets in Songjiang (“Thamestown”) and a “German New Town” near Volkswagen’s plant in Anting.

As indicated above, the city’s geographical features are quite different than the pre-war setting in both name and substance. Some milestones endured: Nanjing Road is still Nanjing Road; the once patently louche Great World Amusement Centre (Da shijie) and carefree Wing On (Yong An) Department Store are still there, albeit tamed by state ownership; the exquisite Huxinting tea house, one of China’s oldest, endures millions of tourists annually. But true to communist frugality, “Yan’an Road” was chosen to replace “Edward VII Avenue” in what was once the International Settlement. And in what was once the French Settlement, Huaihai Road replaced the famous “Avenue Joffre.”
In the 1950s, a Soviet-style Exhibition Centre was built over the semi-legendary Hardoon Garden; streets once named after foreign tycoons like Silas Hardoon or Chinese financier Yu Xiaqing have been "rectified." The semi-legendary race course, once the lynchpin of expatriate social life, has been carved up to make way for the People's Square – Asia's semicolonial horseracing streak lives on in Hong Kong and, more recently, a few new mainland locations.

China's erstwhile “Fleet Street,” Wangping Road, is now Shandong Road. But the unique pre-war vibrancy of that area in which scores of independent publishers thrived is long gone. So too are many of the quaint creeks and canals which once crisscrossed the city, and were reclaimed in the 1910s to make way for tenements and roads – their traces are barely evident in street names carrying the suffix bang 浜 or gang 港 for "waterway." Similarly, the wall which had once encircled Nantao, or the "Native City," is only evident in the crescent shape which Renmin Road and Zhonghua Road form.

*The Pudong-Puxi Antonym*

Lying east of the Huangpu River, the ultra-modern precinct of Pudong was first envisioned by Sun Yat-sen. In the 1920s, he dreamed of a Chinese-run Shanghai that would overshadow what expatriates called "the model settlement,” namely, the International and French concession areas west of the Huangpu River (Puxi).

Pudong's spectacular skyline and its sleek Century Avenue were built only in the last two decades, much faster than any other comparable city in the West. If during Sun's time, and through much of the PRC's history, the Bund's waterfront edifices connoted Shanghai's prosperity under European tutelage, today's Pudong vicariously lives up to Sun's vision of overshadowing the old foreign concessions. This symbolism is by no means lost on Shanghai history buffs, and was most certainly on urban planners' minds in the late 1980s. The Bund’s colonial flavor has been wonderfully preserved, cynics might add, precisely so that it can be dwarfed by Chinese-developed high-rise construction to the east.

As if to make the historical analogy clear, urban planners ensured that every bit of the Bund’s neoclassical and art-deco gems would be meticulously preserved at the expense of most other heritage sites elsewhere in Puxi. In recent years, agile state-backed property developers have been able to take over some of these neglected sites, turning them into exclusive "Old Shanghai"-themed hotels. The great majority, however, still lie dilapidated. More often than not, their 1930s grandeur is drowned out by prosaic eye-sores like shabby air-con wiring or by garish nearby office-blocks.

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Clearly, Pudong is built to overawe visitors: many of its waterfront skyscrapers not only rank among the tallest in the world, but also light up at night, morphing into gigantic LCD screens. Their glass veneers carry a corny blend of commercials and local-government slogans calling on locals to, among other things, congenially greet visitors from other parts of China in standard Mandarin.
The place has definitely got a “Blade-Runner” feel to it, with multinationals headquartered there in magnificent high-rises, alongside even greater high-rises housing newly-established, semi state-owned corporate entities that are aggressively primed to become the Sonys and IBMs of tomorrow. It boasts the world’s only magnetic-traction bullet train (Mag-Lev) and a state-of-the-art subway system and Zeppelins constantly screen commercials and slogans overhead as they waft between skyscrapers.

Gazing at Pudong from across the river, Shanghai seems unfazed by the global financial crisis: the official line pledges to steam ahead with greater investment in higher-education and R&D (Kejiao xing shi). Amid the shine and sparkle, many locals have reassured this history buff that the global financial crisis was not going to hit Shanghai at all. Otherwise, why would banking giant HSBC erect its new 250-metre tall China headquarters in Pudong? Such, we are told, is the bank’s “confidence... in the Chinese economy” that its Pudong home would be much taller than its Hong Kong base (180 m) or, for that matter, its London world headquarters (200 m).

There is canny symbolism to all of this. Completed in 1923, the much smaller domed building which rules the Bund skyline on the opposite bank was once HSBC’s old China headquarters. That was an era when HSBC was China’s de facto central bank. In the 1950s, this building was expropriated by the CCP, and in a wry twist of fate, is now home to the state-owned Pudong Development Bank.
In another twist of fate, foreign banks whose forerunners are less associated with colonialism are returning to the Bund waterfront; Citibank and ABN AMRO are but two examples. The former case is particularly interesting since Citibank’s other Shanghai building dominates Pudong’s skyline from across the river. Citibank accentuates, in that sense, an affiliation with both “Old” and “New” Shanghai. But the big question, of course, is whether Citibank’s upbeat China outlook can help mitigate its sub-prime shemozzle at home. Or could it be that Shanghainese optimism is misguided, and Wall Street will eventually catch up with Century Avenue?

AIG was a supposedly invincible multinational now groaning under the load of US-derived bad debt – this group and its executive bonuses are the talk of the day in Wall Street and on Capitol Hill. However, it seems that only history buffs are aware that AIG actually owes its rise to prominence to Shanghai in the first place. It was here that Cornelius Vander Starr set up the American International Group without much fanfare in 1919. Like HSBC, AIG relocated after the Communist take-over to eventually become one of the largest financial arbiters in the world. Like HSBC, it returned to China with a vengeance in the 1990s. But unlike HSBC, which has survived sub-prime vertigo relatively well, AIG’s future existence is uncertain. Thus, this is not only a question of Wall Street catching up with Century Avenue, but also of the PRC reminding Wall Street and Capitol Hill of Shanghai’s global stature in times past, and of staking out what it sees as the city’s rightful claim to the future of global finance.

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Is the claim legitimate? Granted, for all its hype Pudong does connote quite a bit of contrivance. At dusk, the neon lights loom large, but on closer look the precinct does not exactly teem with life, and traffic is surprisingly light for a Chinese city.

For a moment, one cannot but wonder if Pudong, too, was perhaps an artifact of sub-prime-like self-delusion. It is, after all, well-known that the central government has poured billions of yuan into this area, often with very little scrutiny. The Mag-Lev is a striking example: for all its gripping special-
effects and dazzling speed, it fails to reach populous Puxi, and is therefore hardly-used by commuters. Its main proponent, former mayor Chen Liangyu, now languishes in jail on corruption charges.

Pudong’s skyline clearly offers a counterpoint to the enduring mystique of “Old Shanghai.”[1] But despite two decades of heady redevelopment, for most Shanghainese the west bank beckons brighter, as this popular saying suggests: “I’d rather have a bed to lie on in Puxi than own a whole flat in Pudong!” (*Ningyao Puxi yi zhang chuang, bu yao Pudong yi jian fang* 宁要浦西一张床，不要浦东一间房!).

This hints at a deeper sentiment: for many Pudong is still too contrived and showy. It lacks the historical sediment of Puxi, nowadays re-enacted in Puxi in upmarket theme malls such as Xintiandi. One history buff’s blog captures this desire with the phrase *shili yangcheng* (十里洋场), a four-character expression connoting the “wondrous metropolis of foreign flavours”, which was renowned the world over in the 1930s for its ballrooms, cinemas, cafes, and bars.

What’s more, stunning skyscrapers are increasingly being built around Puxi too. They often encircle what little remains of Shanghai’s distinctive pre-war shikumen tenements. Chinglish, on the other hand, is still alive and well despite the catch-cry of globalization. Thus, for example, People’s Square is rendered “Civilised Park” on a prominent plaque at the entrance. Below the Square is a huge underground shopping arcade themed after “Old Shanghai” with 1930s-style peep shows (*la yangpian* 拉洋片) and distorting mirrors (*haha jing* 哈哈镜).

The arcade is one of many venues capitalizing on “Old Shanghai” mystique, ranging from the quirky history museum at the Oriental Pearl TV Tower basement, to restaurants professing to serve “Old Shanghai” fare, to countless “Old Shanghai” brand names.

*The Last Word*
For all the reasons described above, Shanghai has (re)emerged as a magnet for visitors, micro-entrepreneurs and laborers from all over China. It is also attracting more and more Western expatriates of all socio-economic rungs, though their ratio of the city’s population is still smaller than in the 1930s.

That said, we should reserve the last word for the Shanghainese themselves. They are not – and cannot be – the enterprising sojourners of “Old Shanghai.” Ironically, the strict hukou residency restrictions of Mao’s era nurtured an elitist, linguistically and culturally cohesive sense of Shanghaineness. The city was quite subdued during the 1989 student protest movement, and has since 1991 been smothered in preferential central-government funding.

The Shanghainese of today are a “born-and-bred” privileged corps. Though clearly approving of foreigners, they are often said to be haughty and suspicious of other Chinese. They are described as much more inward-looking and risk-averse than their migrant-society forebears: those resourceful sojourners who had converged on the city from every corner of China at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet, for all their perceived shortcomings, today’s Shanghainese project optimism. This history buff is convinced Shanghai will weather the global financial crisis, and maintain its growth momentum for the most part. The end-product, though, may not eclipse “Old Shanghai” insofar as cosmopolitanism, openness and innovation are concerned. Other parts of China may (or may not) fill the gap.

That Shanghai and its dwellers are future-bound there can be no doubt. But whether Shanghai is the future is another question.

[1] On the enduring mystique of ‘Old Shanghai’ see e.g. Hugo Restall’s excellent piece [March 5, 2009] in the Wall Street Journal

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