# CONSTRUCTING THE HYBRID CITY: SHANGHAI

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## PRELUDE

*...stories          are          set          in          places;          placeless          events          are          nonsensical.*[1]

[1] Paul Dourish and Genevieve Bell, *Divining a Digital Future: Mess and Mythology in Ubiquitous Computing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), p. 126.

The large bottle opener mimicking Shanghai's World Financial Center is somewhat cumbersome for quotidian use, but it appears well placed on a shelf in front of a poster announcing the movie *Masculin Féminin* – a film by Jean-Luc Godard from the mid-sixties whose famous intertitle *The Children of Marx and Coca-Cola* suggests this paper's thesis. China resists attitudes that attempt at analysis and conclusion on the basis of clear-cut categories.[1]



*Figure 1: Shanghai World Financial Center, merchandise, bottle opener. Image reproduced from an advertisement at worthpoint.com.*

## ARRIVING IN SHANGHAI

Possibly, there is no better place than an airport to begin a journey into the realms of the images that seem to mark contemporary life. Within the cityscapes of our contemporary urban centres, airports – strangely enough, despite the digital revolution – still seem to provide for the strongest images signaling connectedness. Airports are highly symbolic of the lifestyle of the cosmopolitans who

populate every urban centre that is considered important. They are symbolic of an everywhere and nowhere, of ubiquitous communication and trade. They are symbolic of a world whose life we just recently saw halted.



*Figure 2: Pudong Airport - interior view. Photograph by C. Westermann.*

From a planner's point of view, airports appear almost fully subscribed to the functional aspects of architecture. They are docking stations for the machines that we invented to take us into the air. They are dedicated to the transport of travellers, their luggage and other freight, and limited by the way our inventions land and take off – not quite like birds. However, the form of our contemporary airports is not only defined by the airplanes' limited possibilities of movement. Further restrictions are given by the laws that regulate the flow of travellers and goods into and out of a specific state.

Thus, while the airplanes with their restricted range of movements on the one hand define to a large extend the form of the airport, on the other hand the airport with the help of its formal expression restricts the possibilities of the passengers' movements. Airports are mediators. In the name of law, they adjust human beings to the limited possibilities of machines. They are docking stations not only for machines but also for human beings. Is it possibly this specific kind of flatness that turns architecture into the image of a building?

The anthropologist Marc Augé alluded to the notion of specific building types, such as air- ports for example, triggering a specific set of specifically contemporary life experiences. They are life experiences that seem to be detached from the past. Marc Augé calls this era supermodernity.[2] Airports are for him non-places. In contrast to anthropological places, these non-places seem to lack in narratives. In fact – at these non-places – narratives are substituted with what emerges most of the time as a need for identification and the fulfilment of this need respectively. Identification replaces identity.[3]
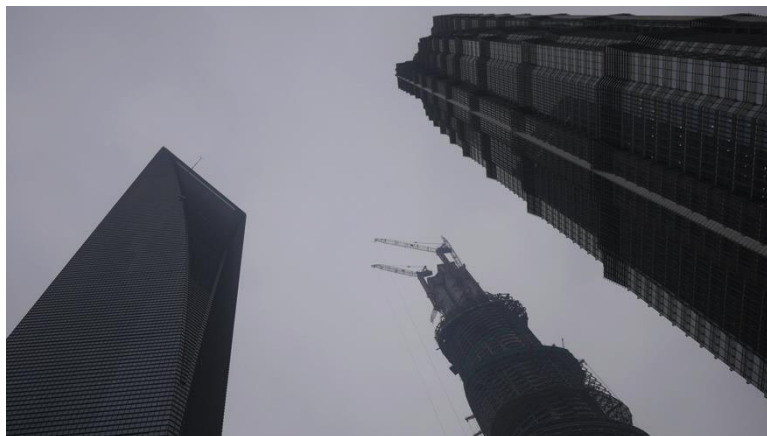
*Figure 3: Three Times Supertall: Shanghai World Financial Centre, Jin Mao Tower, Shanghai Tower under construction. Photograph by C. Westermann.*

I began this journey at an airport that will appear for many of you, who are reading this text, to be located – in one way or another – on the other side of this world. This far away place is marked by a long lasting tradition of writing language in the form of images. An excursion to this other world might help us, I think, to gain a different understanding of the images that we deal with in our urban everyday, and what they could be. I began this journey at Pudong airport in Shanghai, China – one of the busiest airports in the world.

From the airport in Pudong we can take the metro or the magnetic train to Shanghai's most famous skyline, rising alongside the Huangpu river opposite of The Bund. It is a symbol of new confidence. The third of three supertall towers – the second tallest in the world – was finished just a few years ago. On the way to the metro, I catch a glance of the airport from outside. The roof of the airport swings in confidence over enormous distances, in an apparent aspiration to take off. There will be no other memory but this image of this form in the background.

Our landscapes are populated with images. They are powerful images that have been created and used throughout history. They are produced by Architecture, and they tell stories of power and prosperity. Political powers of all schools of thought have recognised in Architecture the perfect ambassador for the efficient advertisement of their value concepts. Our cities – in the West and in the East – testify this process. The competitions for the highest skyscraper, the largest theatre, and the city that is built fastest persistently continue. Consequently, the public rarely perceives Architecture beyond its function as image. What does it mean to detach architecture from its image?   What does it mean to posit the question about the beyond of the image, or rather, what does it mean to consider Architecture beyond its image of power? In which way, does the dissolution of the image possibly imply the dissolution of power itself, because power in fact presupposes the static image?

Could we initiate the re-distribution of power if we succeeded in designing buildings in such a way that they would perpetually draw forth the designing process itself? Could we imagine an architecture that does not – to cite Deyan Sudjic – "suppress the individual into the mass" in order "to glorify and magnify the individual autocrat"[4] Such other architecture would empower its users and finally make them inhabitants and creators of their environments.

What, if we understood the process of design as a perpetual continuation of a tale that withdraws itself from binary logic and instead opens up to a future, in which the tale is to be continued by other agents – at a point in time when the designer has already fully turned away? What kind of tools do we need?

How easily could we recognise processes of inscription and differentiate them from processes of forth-scription? How to differentiate between images of power and images of empowering?



*Figure 4: Merchandise, Shanghai World Financial Center. Photograph by C. Westermann.*

There is hardly any kind of object that the image of the skyline of Shanghai's Pudong has not been transferred to. The Pudong skyline represents contemporary China and its regained powers – its image lures us wherever we go.

## CONSTRUCTING SHANGHAI

*To the ordinary man. To a common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets. […] He is the murmuring voice of all societies. In all ages, he comes before texts.*[5]

Shanghai is a rapidly changing city with a heavy influx of migrants. It gained 7 million new inhabitants in the past decade alone. Around 40% of its estimated 27 million inhabitants consist of migrants from other provinces.[6] They are Chinese migrants, but they do not speak Shanghainese. It is reported that the number of migrants within China will continue to rise rapidly from today's 288 million, which make more than 20% of China's total population. Between 2008 and 2018, 76 million people left their hometown to work elsewhere. Within the next ten years, according to current estimates, there will be at least another 50 million on the move.[7]

They work on the city's myriad construction sites, clean the city's streets and buildings, and work in factories producing goods for international consumption. Some have small shops where they sell the newest gadgets to the growing number of users of cheap smart technology – the so- called e-generation – young people of various backgrounds who have grown up as only-children, who are constantly 'wired' and have learned to adopt new technologies faster than China's cities metamorphose around them.[8] Many of them (again) are migrants, floating through the city, somehow detached, but connected to other places – their hometowns where they have friends and family, and rights.[9]

*Figure 5: Workers on the way to their lunch break on the construction site of the '1000 Trees' project by Heatherwick Studio, Shanghai, November 2019. Photograph by C. Westermann.*

China's household registration system allows only those with the *hukou* of a specific place access to its social security system and its educational facilities.[10] Importantly, the system restricts the access of those with rural *hukou* to the social security systems of urban China. While China has initiated the reform of the household registration system, the process is slow. There are numerous worries. China's cities have already grown at an unprecedented speed. There is fear this growth could run out of control. There are also worries that the decline of the work force in the countryside will lead to problems with the country's food production, not keeping up with the demands of its enormous population. The production of rice, the population's main food, still depends on manual labour. That there are relevant and understandable reasons for why *hukou* system is still in place, however, does not undo its harshness for parts of China's population. Admittedly, local governments in China have for some time engaged in experiments at various scales that aim at a better understanding of how living in the countryside could become a sustainable alternative to living in the city, and what kind of business models would work in rural China.[11] At the moment, the money made in the city flows into the countryside to support both the elderly and children who have stayed at `home'.

While the *hukou* system creates the most obvious, and visible form of exclusion in contemporary China, there appear to be many other forms of exclusion and detachment from the actual living environments, and all of them appear to be countered with an escape into communications that are conducted in digital channels, mostly through mobile devices to which almost everyone has access as they are cheap. There were around 1.5 mobile phones per inhabitant in Shanghai in 2018. For comparison, the mobile phone subscription rates in Western countries typically range between 1.1 and 1.25 per inhabitant.[12]

If the idea of place cannot be detached from physical living environments, then contemporary China may face an existential question. If the conceptualisations of place – as giving sense to events[13] – are not only romantic ideas that belong to the old times, or maybe to old Europe, but ideas that are universal, then there might be a reason for the emptiness on Pudong's streets and sidewalks. The ubiquity of the image of Pudong's skyline might give an honest account of what the contemporary networked city in China is like – mobile and placeless. Is there an option for shifting the situation? Is there a need for it, or a desire?

After reviewing ideas of place and narrative, and related to these, the role of media and technology, a detour via Chinese aesthetics, I suggest, could be a useful exercise in suspending fixed conceptions. China's art has a long history in thinking the viewer as a participant in the work.[14] Notably, the British

artist David Hockney emphasized the interactive feature of the Chinese oblique projection.[15] In an essay from around 1080 AD, the famous painter Guo Xi writes:

*It is generally accepted opinion that in landscapes there are those through which you may travel, those in which you may sightsee, those through which you may wander, and those in which you may live. Any paintings attaining these effects are to be considered excellent, but those suitable for traveling and sightseeing are not as successful in achievement as those suitable for wandering and living.[16]*

There is a similar emphasis on the importance of painting to be both interactive and alive in other painting manuals, such as the famous Mustard Seed Garden of Painting, which was written around 600 years after Guo Xi's essay.[17] Further interpretations of Chinese traditional art, which indicate notions of interactivity that are quite uncommon in Western art of the same periods, can also be found in the writings of the contemporary philosophers François Jullien and Byung-Chul Han.[18]

The interactive is inherent in Chinese traditional art. It is indicative of a cultural attitude that has emerged in the West only with postmodernity – an attitude that embraces the incomplete. Considering this, we might want to reconsider how we look at Chinese cities. As tempting as it appears to draw a parallel between the boom years of China now and – for example – the boom years of the USA in the 50s, as much we might go wrong.[19] The images we observe might look alike but structurally differ. The Chinese skyscrapers might not simply signal a process that the West has already gone through. Instead the Chinese skyscrapers and new cities, and even newer cities, might signal an intelligent way of drawing forth and walking forth on a path that is originally Chinese, and on which 'empty' places[20] still await their stamps – that some others will imprint in the future. Mobile technology might play a role in this process.

The journey via traditional China might lead us – post-post-modern observers in the East and West – to the idea of a new city that acts like a scroll. Multiple vanishing points relate to the complexity of narratives that make place. Sitting on the Chinese rocks of which the old masters said that they must be depicted as alive, we might learn less about China than it appears to be the case at first glance, but we might gain new perspectives on our situation, and see new options for our cities, new possibilities for creating interfaces that allow for a form of participation that turn spaces into places, and make users inhabitants.

*Figure 6: Dwelling amidst Water and Bamboo (水竹居圖), Ni Zan (倪瓚, 1301-1374), Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368). Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper, 53.6 x 27.7 cm, National Museum of China, Beijing.*

**NOTES**

[1] Jean-Luc Godard, Director, *Masculin Féminin*, Film,105 minutes. (France: Columbia Films S. A., 1966); For an analysis of the complexities of seemingly clear-cut categories dealt with in Godard's film, for which the terms 'feminine' and 'masculine' are only an example, see: Phillip John Usher, "De Sexe Incertain: Masculin Féminin de Godard (Of Uncertain Sex: Masculine Feminine by Godard)," *French Forum* 34, no. 2 (2009): 97–112; For an outline of why the film is still relevant today see: Anthony Oliver Scott, "A 60's Story That Now Looks Timeless," *New York Times* 154, no. 53122 (February 11, 2005): E3.

[2] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London and New York: Verso, [1992] 1995).

[3] For an expanded outline of this thought, see: Claudia Westermann, "An Experimental Research into Inhabitable Theories" (PhD thesis, CAiiA, Planetary Collegium, School of Art and Media, University of Plymouth, 2011), pp. 55-67.

[4] Deyan Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex: The Architecture of Power* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 431.

[5] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. v.

[6] For statistical data see the following collections National Bureau of Statistics of China, "Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2019 National Economic and Social Development," February 28, 2020, accessed July 1, 2020, http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202002/t20200228_1728917.html; Statistica, "Dossier: China," 2020, accessed July 1, 2020, https://www.statista.com/study/9896/china-statista-dossier/; Statistica, "Dossier: Shanghai," 2020, accessed July 1, 2020, https : / / www . statista . com/ topics/ 6673 / shanghai/; Statistica, "Dossier: Migrant Workers in China," 2020, accessed July 1, 2020, https://www.statista.com/topics/1540/migrant-workers-in-china/.

[7] Statistica, "Dossier: Migrant Workers in China."

[8] Fengshu Liu, "Wired for Fun. Narratives by Members of China's E-Generation," *Young* 19, no. 1 (2011): 69–89; Fengshu Liu, "The Norm of the 'Good' Netizen and the Construction of the 'proper' Wired Self: The Case of Chinese Urban Youth," *New Media and Society* 13, no. 1 (2011): 7–22.

[9] Jack Linchuan Qiu, *Working-Class Network Society: Communication Technology and the Information Have-Less in Urban China*, Information revolution and global politics (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); Jack Linchuan Qiu, "'Power to the People!' Mobiles, Migrants, and Social Movements in Asia," *International Journal of Communication* 8 (2014): 376–391; Jack Linchuan Qiu, "Three Phases in the Development of China's Network Society," in *Society and the Internet: How Networks of Information and Communication Are Changing our Lives*, 2nd, ed. Mark Graham and William H. Dutton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 341–356.

[10] For a comprehensive outline of what the *hukou* system is and what its consequences are, see: Chunbing Xing, "Migration, Self-Selection and Income Distributions: Evidence from Rural and Urban China," *Economics of Transition* 22, no. 3 (2014): 539–576.

[11] See for example: Hans-Jürgen Commerell and Kristin Feireiss, *The Songyang Story: Architectural Acupuncture as Driver for Socio-Economic Progress in Rural China. Projects by Xu Tiantian, DnA_Beijing* (Zürich: Park Books, 2020).

[12] Unfortunately the Chinese data gives only the number of phones per inhabitant, while the information for Western countries is based on the number of subscriptions per inhabitant. The data nevertheless gives an indication of how popular and common mobile phones are in China, with Beijing and Shanghai ranging at the top of the list. One can be most certain that the numbers today are higher than in 2018. For the mobile phone data see: Statistica, "Dossier: Smartphones," 2020, accessed August 5, 2020, https://www.statista.com/topics/840/smartphones/; Statistica, "Number of Mobile Telephones per 100 Inhabitants in China in 2018, by Region," July 15, 2020, accessed August 5, 2020, https://www.statista.com/statistics/278523/number- of- mobile-telephone-connections-per-100-inhabitants-in-china-by-region/.

[13] Dourish and Bell, *Divining a Digital Future: Mess and Mythology in Ubiquitous Computing*, p. 126.

[14] 15I have previously written about notions of interactivity in Chinese traditional art. See: Claudia Westermann and Hai-Ning Liang, "The Potentiality of Blandness: A Journey via the East to Rethinking Interaction: Workshop - W27: Leveraging and Integrating Eastern and Western Insights into Human Engagement Studies in HCI" (CHI '15: CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems Seoul Republic of Korea, April 18 - 23, 2015, February 1, 2015), accessed July 15, 2020, https://shorturl.at/cxEY9; Claudia Westermann, "On Delight: Thoughts for Tomorrow," *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research* 16, no. 1 (2018): pp. 47-49; Claudia Westermann, "An Eco-poetic Approach to Architecture Across Boundaries," *KnE Social Sciences* 3, no. 27 (November 2019): 281–291, doi:10.18502/kss.v3i27.5533; Claudia Westermann, "Chinese Landscape

Aesthetics: The Exchange and Nurturing of Emotions," in *New Horizons: Eight Perspectives on Chinese Landscape Architecture Today* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2020), 2–5.

[15] David Hockney and Philip Haas, Directors, *A Day on the Grand Canal with the Emperor of China, or Surface Is Illusion but so Is Depth*, Film, 46 minutes (New York: Milestone Films, 1988).

[16] Excerpt of *The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams* by Guo Xi, ca. 1090 CE3 Susan Bush and Hsio-Yen Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting.* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), pp. 151-152.

[17] Mai-Mai Sze and Kai Wang, *The Mustard Seed Garden: Manual of Painting* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, [1679-1701] 1978).

[18] See in particular: François Jullien, *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*, Zone Books, Originally published in French in 1995. (Zone Books, 2000); François Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics* (New York: Zone Books, [1991] 2008); François Jullien, *The Impossible Nude* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Byung-Chul Han, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, trans. Philippa Hurd, Untimely Meditations (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, [2011] 2017).

[19] Thomas J. Campanella, *The Concrete Dragon: China's Urban Revolution and What it Means for the World* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008); Thomas J. Campanella, "China: As We Once Were," *Journal of Architectural Education*, no. 2 (2010): 63.

[20] Compare Han, <u>*Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*</u>.

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