

The Power of Spectacle

By Anna Greenspan

Abstract

When people say Shanghai looks like the future the setting is almost always the same. Evening descends and the skyscrapers clustered on the eastern shore of the Huangpu light up. Super towers are transformed into giant screens. The spectacular skyline, all neon and lasers and LED, looms as a science fiction backdrop. Staring out from the Bund, across to Pudong, one senses the reemergence of what JG Ballard once described as an "electric and lurid city, more exciting than any other in the world." The high-speed development of Pudong – in particular the financial district of Lujiazui – is the symbol of contemporary Shanghai and of China's miraculous rise.

Yet, Pudong is also taken as a sign of much that is wrong with China's new urbanism. To critics the sci-fi skyline is an emblem of the city's shallowness, which focuses all attention on its glossy facade. Many share the sentiment of free market economist Milton Friedman who, when visiting Pudong famously derided the brand new spectacle as a giant Potemkin village. Nothing but "the statist monument for a dead pharaoh," he is quoted as saying.

This article explores Pudong in order to investigate the way spectacle functions in China's most dynamic metropolis. It argues that the skeptical hostility towards spectacle is rooted in the particularities of a Western philosophical tradition that insists on penetrating the surface, associating falsity with darkness and truth with light.

In contrast, China has long recognized the power of spectacle (most famously inventing gunpowder but using it only for fireworks). Alongside this comes an acceptance of a shadowy world that belongs to the dark. This acknowledgment of both darkness and light found in traditional Chinese culture (expressed by the constant revolutions of the yin/yang symbol) may provide an alternative method for thinking about the tension between the spectacular visions of planners and the unexpected and shadowy disruptions from the street.

Keywords: Shanghai, spectacle, urbanity

That which lets now the dark, now the light appear is dao – Laozi

There is a “before and after” photograph of Shanghai, taken 20 years apart, that periodically circulates through cyberspace.¹ The contrasting images zoom in on the shores of the Huangpu, the city’s main river. By fast forwarding through time, they maximize the impact of the recent urban mutation. The result is a visceral illustration of the shocking intensity of Shanghai’s high-speed rise. In the sepia toned image from 1990, the Huangpu acts as a sharp divide, the line separating urban density from rural sprawl. While the western shore (Puxi) is dominated by the colonial architecture of a once modern metropolis, the Pudong district, in the East, is nothing but a nondescript flatland of factories, shanty-town housing and farmland. Zhao Qizheng, a government official charged with the development of Pudong, bemoaned the imbalance of the time, describing 1990s Shanghai as a “mal-developed cripple” (Zhao, Qizheng & Yudong Shao 2008: 10).

The contrasting picture, of Shanghai 2010, is taken at night, when the city is awash with neon and LED lights. Pudong, by then home to one of the densest clusters of skyscrapers in the world, now dominates the urban landscape. In this image the city resembles the backdrop to a science fiction fantasy with whole buildings metamorphosing into screens. Here, in these illuminated high-rises with their garish explosion of color, China’s economic miracle receives its most vivid and concrete manifestation.

This awe-inspiring view of Pudong has become the quintessential icon of 21st century Shanghai. It is the face of China’s development, the window onto the country’s current modernization. This is why stories about the country’s rise are so often accompanied by an image of Pudong’s skyline. This chapter begins with the futuristic vision of Pudong in order to explore the vital role that spectacle plays in the contemporary Chinese metropolis.

Shanghai is a city obsessed with its own image. This was especially apparent in the lead up to Expo, when giant billboards and video screens unabashedly declared Shanghai’s ambitions for growth. This self-reflexive PR, however, hardly needs the excuse of a giant event. Here, hype forms an integral part of the landscape. Shanghai is often identified with its most stylish female inhabitants (Shanghai’s femininity versus Beijing’s masculinity is one of the key components of the long and ongoing haipai versus jingpai debate).² Living here one gets the sense that the city itself takes great delight in gazing in the mirror, preening. Shops selling luxury brands are multiplying everywhere, despite the fact that few Shanghainese can afford them. The malls that house them are so empty that locals call them ghost malls, but this doesn’t seem to be a problem.³ As China’s image of growth, Shanghai is pure window display.

This fascination with façade is frequently condemned. To critics, Shanghai’s embrace of urban spectacle is tied to a harmful neglect of the needs and desires of the real, living city. There is no doubt that this destructive idea of the spectacle is increasingly at work in Shanghai. Aligned with the all too common conception

that the modern is necessarily Western, it manifests itself in the intermittent campaigns to clean up the streets. At their worst, these clean up crusades accentuate a damaging lack of confidence, and seek to erase all signs of a local “backward” “uncivilized” culture. Street food, hanging laundry and people in pajamas⁴ are all forcefully replaced with a tired, depressing view of Global Shanghai filled with Gucci stores and KFCs.⁵

There is, however, another, much more positive notion of spectacle that is also at play in the city today. In this alternative vision, spectacle is not equated with the falsity of illusion and the darkness of deceit, as it is in the Western philosophical tradition. Instead, it is rooted in Chinese culture and thought, which has its own understanding of shadow and light, and operates with a decidedly different attitude to what is revealed on the surface and what is concealed beneath. Under this more indigenous conception, spectacle is itself productive, both because of what it can attract and also – even more vitally – because it allows for another realm to operate freely in the shadows. In this positive conception, the power of spectacle can help create a 21st century metropolis in which a dazzling science fiction skyline can comfortably coexist with the rich, vibrant and chaotic urbanism of the street.

In his book *Postcards From Tomorrow Square*, which reports on his impressions from China, journalist James Fallows comments on the seemingly incomprehensible disjunction found throughout Shanghai. “I have not before been anyplace that seemed simultaneously so controlled and so out of control,” he writes. “The control is from on high... What’s out of control is everything else” (Fallows 2008). Inside China, a popular saying captures this critical dichotomy: Policies above, counter-strategies below (*shangyou zhengce, xiayou duice*). Shanghai’s future, as we will see, depends on the unfolding of this unprecedented, unpredictable mix of the planned urban spectacle on one hand and, on the other, the city’s unplanned culture that takes place in the darkness, hidden from view.

Pudong has always been infused with spectacle. Dreams of Shanghai’s reimagined Eastern shore date back to the beginnings of the 20th century. In 1921 Sun Yat Sen proposed a plan for the “Great Port of Pudong” deeming it essential to the project of national reconstruction. The grandiose vision included redirecting the Huangpu, drowning out the colonial buildings of the Bund and creating a new modern port (Macpherson 1994).

For decades, this grandiose fantasy was buried by China’s tumultuous history of revolution and war. But, in the early 1980’s, as soon as Deng Xiaoping’s strategy of opening and reform began taking root elsewhere, the seeds of Pudong’s resurrection were planted. A decade later in 1990 premier Li Peng officially sanctioned the development of the Pudong New Area (Macpherson 1994: 57). Large scale

urban planning in the area, however, did not occur until after Deng Xiaoping's 1992 tour of the south when, in an oft quoted statement, Deng expressed regret over his policy with respect to Shanghai. "Looking back [I realize that] one of my main mistakes was not including Shanghai when I designated the four Special Economic Zones" (quoted in Chen 2007: 59) he told his welcoming crowd. In Shanghai, Deng's words were interpreted as a green light for the spectacular ambitions for Pudong. Pudong would be built as a sign of the nation's reemergence – a symbolic commercial center that would overshadow the colonial legacy of the Bund.

Zhu Rongji, mayor of Shanghai from 1988-1991, and the person most often credited with the development of the district, saw Pudong as a way of ending Shanghai's isolation; a test case for the new open door policies, which sought economic efficiency, an increasing role for markets, and rapid economic growth. As boosters publicly stated at the time, Pudong "demonstrates the determination of the nation to open a wider door to the outside world" (Macpherson 1994: 57). Pudong's central business district was especially conceived, as research by Kris Olds reveals, as a giant PR exercise. Planners impressed with the urban monumentality they had seen in the cities of Europe (Pudong owes much to Paris' La Defense) envisioned the gleaming skyscrapers and striking skylines as icons to the "successes of China's open door policy" (Huang quoted in Olds 1997: 116). From the start, Shanghai's new CBD, said Huang Fuxiang, who was leading the team at the Shanghai Urban Planning and Design Institute (SUPDI), was to be a "symbol and image of the results of reform" (Olds 1997, 116). "The tall buildings in Lujiazui were not built to satisfy the need for vertical expansion due to the lack of horizontal space," argues academic Non Arkaraprasertkul, "but for the purpose of generating monumental symbolic value" (2011). In overshadowing the Bund, icon to a previous age, Pudong was designed as the emblem of a new Chinese modernity.

True to Pudong's spirit of openness, Premier Zhu who was dissatisfied with the level of urban expertise on the mainland, sought help from the outside. In 1993, in consultation with the *Institut d'Amenagement et d'Urbanisme de la Region d'Ile de France* in Paris, Zhu announced an international competition for the development of Lujiazui and invited a host of top architectural firms to compete. Four teams, Richard Rogers, Toyo Ito, Massimiliano Fuksas, and Dominique Perrault submitted detailed planning proposals for the heart of Pudong. Officials carefully considered all these plans and then, in a move that would later be frequently repeated, dismissed them all. In the end, the project was awarded to SUPDI, a local company that understood the environment, was familiar with the site and its politics and could be trusted to work with the required speed. In creating their final blueprint the institute incorporated elements from many of the foreign proposals but gave them Chinese characteristics, adapting them to local needs. The final design had certain fixed elements, the wide central axis and the cluster of three

super tall towers for example, but it also ensured a large amount of flexibility for future construction.

The importance of the international architectural competition, then, was not so much for the particular blueprints it offered but rather as an early key to Pudong's publicity campaign. The competition, writes Olds, "was viewed by the Shanghai Municipal Government as a mediated publicity show, a discursive event which would raise the international profile of Lujiazui and Pudong (Olds 1997: 117). The fact that in the end the foreign input had only a minimal impact mattered little since, as Olds explains, their role was largely promotional (Ibid). Once the competition was complete, the images, diagrams and models created by the famous firms could be replicated in brochures and websites and used to lure in attention and investment, Pudong, then, even in its planning phase, was understood as a branding exercise, a method of attracting foreign investment and solidifying domestic support.

This strategy of constructing a spectacle in Pudong is still in explicit use today. The 1999-2020 comprehensive plan promises to "further the image construction of Pudong New Area." Pudong, then, is still conceived as showcase. Its glistening, majestic super-tall skyscrapers are the ultimate photogenic objects. They exist both to be gazed at and gazed through. Like all of Shanghai, they are best viewed at night, when the whole city is awash with lights and projection and entire buildings are transformed into screens, further accentuating the flat surface of things.

In a work called "Santa's Little Helpers" local artist Chen Hangfeng cleverly captured this propensity of the city to present only its glittery facade. The piece consists of video recordings taken in the nearby villages of Zhejiang province where family run back room factories produce – painstakingly, by hand – the majority of the world's Christmas decorations. At the show, the videos were placed inside large boxes wrapped in paper and decorated with bows. To see them, viewers had to stoop over and peer through a peephole that was deliberately placed in an uncomfortable position. In Shanghai to look past the surface takes work.

Critics, scorn this superficiality with derisive disdain. They berate the city for presenting a dazzling exterior that blinds people to the truth buried below the surface sheen. In Shanghai when old buildings fall into disrepair bricks are not repaired they are simply painted over. In the mass urban clean-up that took place for the World Expo doorways, gates and fences were made to sparkle and shine, while everything that could not be easily seen was left in a state of ragged disrepair.

The most savage of this type of criticism is saved for Pudong. Here the fixation on face, it is argued, has produced an urban district that seems to lack all the conveniences and vibrancy that is so crucial to the creation of a successful metropoli-

tan core. Urbanist Thomas Campella's bitter attack on Lujiazui is one that is widely shared:

What appears so definitely urban from afar – as a skyline – is on foot not only dull but spatially unpleasant and even intimidating. In the end, Lujiazui is little more than a preening clutch of monuments lunging for the sky. This is the urbanism of naked ambition, if it urbanism at all. Here was an opportunity to build a model city, and what has come instead is photogenic monumentality – a stage set city intended to impress from a distance, from the bund, from the air, from the pages of a glossy magazine. Lujiazui is indeed a good place for architectural photography; its austere vistas are most of the time unencumbered by messy pedestrians, bicyclists or street vendors with their stacks of steaming buns (Campanella 2008: 81).

Even before construction began, Pudong was being dismissed as a spectacle. In 1988 free-market economist Milton Friedman came to Shanghai for a conference organized by the Cato Institute on China and Economic Reform. During his visit, he was proudly shown early plans for the district. Yet, the dazzling ambition did not impress. Pudong, Friedman quipped is "not a manifestation of the market economy, but a statist monument for a dead pharaoh on the level of the pyramids" (quoted in Huang, 2008: 7). Over a decade later, when Pudong's astonishing transformation was well underway, *The Shanghai Star*, a local English language weekly, echoed the libertarian sentiment. Quoting a Hong Kong newspaper the magazine editorialized: "Through sheer chutzpah and public relations guile Shanghai's super-smooth politicians somehow dissuade foreign investors, leaders and even journalists from looking too closely at their fair city's facade... Shanghai is arguably a Potemkin village on a massive scale" (Shanghai Star, 2003).

Contemporary Shanghai's most searing critic, MIT economist Yasheng Huang shares this vision of a city that is cloaked in a deceptive layer of glamour and gloss. "Much of the admiration of Shanghai," writes Huang with an angry frustration, "is based on visual evidence" (Huang 2008: 176). Mocking the veneration of "foreign observers" who are too easily duped, Huang accuses Shanghai of being "the world's most successful Potemkin metropolis" (p. 231).

Huang's book *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics*, dedicates an entire chapter to dissecting the truth behind Shanghai's shallow façade. The chapter, entitled "What is wrong with Shanghai" argues that the "dizzying rise of skyscrapers from the rice paddies of Pudong" are "both the sign and the culprit of what is structurally ailing the Chinese economy." Rather than the mark of success, they are "a glaring warning sign" of the fragility of a system that might one day collapse (Huang 2008: 231).

The substance of Huang's critique is an attack on what he calls the "Shanghai model of growth," which came to the fore in the 1990s. According to Huang, the Shanghai model is based on a high-speed urbanism that favors massive state

owned enterprise and giant multinational corporations. Its primary aim is the attraction of foreign direct investment (FDI) and its success is measured solely in a rising GDP. He contrasts this economic model with a vibrant bottom-up sector of small, private entrepreneurs from the countryside, which dominated China's initial wave of economic reform that took place throughout the 1980s. This more organic, rural entrepreneurship creates wealth for individuals not just for the State. It is these small private businesses, Huang argues, rather than the state led crony capitalism responsible for the spectacular rise of Shanghai, that is the real force behind China's economic miracle. Reviewing Huang's book, *The Economist* magazine sums up the argument as follows: Huang "has discovered two Chinas: one, from not so long ago, vibrant, entrepreneurial and rural; the other, today's China, urban and controlled by the state" (The Economist 2008).

Huang is a careful researcher and provides plenty of data to back up his claims. Yet, perhaps the separation between these "two Chinas" is not as neat as he suggests. China, after all, is currently in the grip of a mass wave of urbanization, the biggest the world has ever seen. The rural entrepreneurs that once revolutionized village life are now seeking their fortunes on the city streets. Shanghai's dynamic rise rests not only on the spectacular projects of a state led urbanism, but also on the vibrancy of the life and culture of these migrant workers. Outside the hyper-modern gloss of new roads and skyscrapers, there is a thriving micro-commercial culture – made up primarily of migrants from the countryside – which constitutes a flourishing informal economy that infiltrates the urban core. Moreover, as the "dragon-head" of the Yangtze River Delta Shanghai is intimately connected with the entrepreneurship of the region Huang celebrates most. What, after all, is the urban gloss of Shanghai, if not a shop window for the back alley factories of Zhejiang?

The notion of a Potemkin village stems from Russian minister Grigory Potemkin, who is said to have constructed elaborate fake villages in order to fool Catherine the Great on her tours of Crimea in the 18th century. In modern times, the idea has come to imply a stage set, a show that is designed to mislead. Those clever enough to see past the pretense will discover a pitiful reality that must be shamefully disguised. In Shanghai, however the glittering artifice is not just meant to deceive. Rather it is embraced as a show, a global attraction that – at least when conceived in this manner – need not interfere with the messy, vibrant entrepreneurial culture that continues to power the everyday life and culture of the street.

It is possible, then, to understand Huang's divide between "two China's" not in terms of time (the 1980s versus the 1990s),⁶ nor in terms of space (cities versus the countryside), but rather as an abstract distinction between two different economic orders that operate simultaneously in the city. This formulation is derived

from the historian Fernand Braudel,⁷ most famous for his monumental 3-volume history of capitalism. The fundamental conclusion of this epic work is that there is, to use Braudel's words, a "dialectic, still very much alive, between capitalism on one hand, and its antithesis, the 'non-capitalism' of the lower level on the other. Capitalism as distinct from the market economy, is for me," he writes, "the essential message of this long quest" (Braudel 1992b: 620).

Throughout his historical analysis, Braudel shows that these two economic realms – a higher-level capitalist order, consisting of monopolies and large corporations and a substratum of market activity – have both been at work since as far back as the thirteenth century. Braudel identifies the mega-institutions of the higher level by their "high-intensity capitalist endeavor; the privileges they are granted by the state; and their appropriation of whole sectors of overseas trade" (Braudel 1992a: 443) Yet, while this more centralized and organized economic order has always been more visible, its secret is the strength it draws from the markets, which continually exist underneath and alongside it. Braudel repeatedly draws attention to "the enormous creative powers of the market, of the lower storey of exchange..."

[This] lowest level, not being paralyzed by the size of its plant or organization, is the one readiest to adapt; it is the seed bed of inspiration, improvisation and even innovation, although its most brilliant discoveries sooner or later fall into the hands of the holders of capital. It was not the capitalists who brought about the first cotton revolution; all the new ideas came from enterprising small businesses" (Braudel 1992b: 631).

Walk through Shanghai's streets and alleys exploring the plethora of street vendors with their mobile carts selling everything from stockings and fresh vegetables, to houseplants and pirated DVDs and it soon becomes clear that the city's spectacle exists only on the surface. The attention to glossy façade, massive state owned corporations, concentration on FDI, and support of monumental urbanism co-exists everywhere – just as Braudel suggests – with a lower level, bottom up, thriving market activity that constitutes life in Shanghai's streets and alleyways.

The ongoing interaction between these two layers – or economic orders – is of fundamental importance to Shanghai's future. How is their relationship to be conceived? Are they poised on the brink of battle? At times it appears so. On one side, a monumental urbanism attempts to crush the micro-entrepreneurs that are helping to power China's growth. Deemed messy, unsightly, and uncivilized this organic street culture is continuously subject to the attempts to stamp it out and sweep it away. On the other side, the country's "ongoing bottom-up transformation" – to borrow a term from theorist Kate Zhou (2009) – bubbles up, gathering strength, waiting to overthrow the top down planners responsible for the

“Shanghai model of growth.” Yet, in the rhythms of everyday life in the city, it is possible to catch a glimpse of another more murky type of interrelationship that, were it allowed to exist, could help define a Shanghai futurism in which the gloss of urban spectacle could coexist with an emergent, micro-commercial and out of control culture that thrives in the shadows.

On the streets of Shanghai, this tension, between freedom and control manifests itself in daily clashes that occur between the *chengguan* (the city inspectors) and street vendors. Though the *chengguan* are not official government employees, they are tasked with keeping the streets clean and have the right to chase off vendors and seize their money and goods. At times this unofficial policing becomes horribly violent – the *chengguan* are generally made up of unemployed state owned workers and have a reputation for thuggery. Charged with maintaining the Shanghai spectacle, *chengguan* have beaten – even to the point of brain damage – migrant entrepreneurs. Outrage over their brutality has resulted in more than one urban riot.⁸

Nevertheless, there are zones of the city where a workable compromise between city inspectors and street vendors seems to have been reached. In these places the vendors have been working the same spot for many years and have developed relationships with the area’s *chengguan*. When the inspectors are on duty (their daily schedule is no secret) the vendors disappear – or at least move off to one side. Their “face” preserved and their duty done, the inspectors happily go off to eat or rest. As soon as they leave the vendors return to their spots. This type of give and take, say one thing, do another, relationship is a vital component of the contemporary Chinese city. Anyone familiar with Shanghai will immediately recognize this type of compromise. In China, goes another saying, “green light means go, yellow light means speed up and red light means find another way around.” In these kinds of “arrangements with Chinese characteristics” the concept of spectacle is key.

China loves a good show. It famously invented gunpowder but rather than use it as deadly ammunition, it created grandiose firework displays. This deep respect for pageantry is apparent in the Forbidden City, headquarters of China’s imperial power, whose intricate layering, ensures that every visitor participate in an elaborate theatrical performance. The Chinese skill at staging such performances was revealed to the world in the astonishing opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympics. A year later, in 2009 celebrations for the 60-year anniversary of the Communist Party occurred under a sunny blue sky. This did not happen naturally. The party manipulated the weather for the event. In China it is no secret that these spectacles are choreographed. That the Olympic fireworks were photoshopped for TV, that pretty smiling girls were brought in for the opening, or that the clouds were seed-

ed for the Party's grand parade should come as no surprise. Here illusion has long functioned as a crucial currency of power. You only have to visit the great wall to realize that China's greatest monument was built more as a symbol than for any functional purpose. This profound attention to exteriority and façade attains an intensely personal expression in the Chinese concept of "face." To lose face, in this shame-based culture, is itself a devastating failure and thus functions, for both children and adults, as an enormously powerful mechanism for behavioral control. In China, it is recognized, spectacle works.

In the case of Shanghai, and, especially Pudong, this is blatantly obvious. Shanghai may be built on hype, but the hype has produced some very real results. The power of PR, Kris Olds tells us, was evident as soon as Pudong planners launched the international competition for the development of Lujiazui. "The identity of the district was transformed immediately from a former industrial and residential zone, into a high-tech city set to rise out of Shanghai's shadow" (Olds 1997: 120). "Before the start of the Pudong development, concurs' researcher Yawei Chen, "Shanghai was an unattractive place to invest, notorious for its rigidity, bureaucracy and red tape. Within 15 years all that changed" (Chen 2007: 284)

The Western philosophical tradition has a deep-rooted animosity to spectacle. This ancient and foundational hostility is captured by Plato's famous image of the cave, which tragically likens our existence to prisoners who are forced to spend their lives gazing at shadows that are projected on the wall. The prisoners, forgetting what they once knew of the outside world, are fooled into mistaking the illusion for reality. In Plato's parable one prisoner manages to escape and makes his way out of the cave. Slowly – after his eyes painfully adjust to the light – he sees the truth of the world illuminated by the brightness of the sun. With the truth revealed he returns to his friends, the prisoners, who reject his story of escape as a lie. The philosopher king – our hero – presses on. The shadows must be eliminated. The spectacle must be penetrated. All that is true and good must be brought to the light.

China has an altogether different outlook on the spectacular. It does not condemn illusion in the same way. One of most famous Taoist fables from the Zhuangzi tells of a man who dreams of a butterfly. When he suddenly awakes he finds himself again a man. In the end, the story teaches, we do not know whether it is the man dreaming the butterfly or the butterfly dreaming the man. Western thought encounters the idea that the world may have the character of a dream as the terror of epistemological uncertainty.⁹ Renee Descartes, faced with a similar thought, recoiled in horror. His subsequent quest for certainty eventually formed the foundation for modern Western thought. The Zhuangzi is far more comfortable with the coexistence of the dreamer and the dreamed. To the Taoist both are

equally real, equally authentic, equally valid. “There must be some distinction between Zhou and a butterfly!” says the Zhuangzi, “This is called the transformation of things”.

This acceptance of spectacle is rooted in a philosophical tradition that, unlike the West, does not associate brightness with truth and darkness with the falsity of illusion. One of China’s oldest classical texts – and one of few books to have survived the Qin Emperor’s great book burning in the 3rd century BC – is the Yijing. At the heart of the Yijing is a divinatory system made up of 64 hexagrams that are composed of multiple variations of broken and unbroken lines. The lines represent the yin/yang dualism that is at the foundation of Chinese thought. Originally and literally yin and yang denote the shady and sunny side of a mountain. Over time these principles accrued deeper significance. The Yijing, writes scholar Wonsuk Chang, “depicts contrasting forces through a variety of terms relevant to different situations”:

rest (jing) and movement (dong), softness (rou) and firmness (gang), within form (qi) and above form (dao), receptivity (kun) and creativity (qian), completion (zheng) and beginning (shi), simplicity(jian) and easiness (yi), progression (jin) and regression (tui), darkness (yu) and brightness (ming), ghosts or dissemination (gui) and spirits or stretching (shen), wisdom (zhi) and benevolence (ren), cold (han) and hot (shu), hidden (cang) and disclosing (xian), and enlarging life (dasheng) and broadening life (guangsheng). (Wonsuk 2009: 222)

According to Chinese philosophy, yin and yang emerge together out of primordial emptiness. They are interconnected and give rise to each other. The world is produced through their constant rotation of shadow and light. Time itself, the Yijing teaches, is governed by this constant shifting change.

The fundamental dualism of shadow and light manifests itself in contemporary Chinese society in a number of ways. One of its most profound expressions is in the thin line that separates the Chinese government from the Communist Party. This dualism is essential to the structure of the State. In China today the government and other state organs perform on the front stage, creating an outward spectacle. Behind the scenes, the Party rules. In China, every segment of the public realm – the military, the state owned companies, each and every layer of government – is intricately shadowed by the Party, which stealthily remains out of sight. “It is backstage, in the party forums,” writes journalist Richard McGregor “where the real stuff of politics is transacted” (McGregor 2010: 15). This concealment of the Party is the key insight of McGregor’s bestselling book. The theme is introduced in the preface. “The problem in writing about the Party,” McGregor confesses, “is that, as much as the Party might be staring you in the face, you can’t easily gaze back... Sometimes, you can’t see the Party at all” (McGregor 2010: xvii). Throughout the book this idea of the Party dominating the country from the

shadows forms an ongoing motif. “The Party is the grand puppeteer” (McGregor 2010: 48). McGregor quotes one businessman working in the state owned sector as saying. It is “like a phantom” echoes a lawyer from Beijing (McGregor 2010: 22). The best analogy, though, comes from a professor in Beijing “the party is like God. He is everywhere. You just can’t see him.” (McGregor 2010: 1)

Liberals in China attack this lack of transparency as the dark-side of China’s recent reforms.¹⁰ When a secret sub-sector of society has hidden access both to great power and to great wealth the inevitable result is corruption. The concealment of the party, they contend, has created a mafia state run off crony capitalism.¹¹ Hope for the future rest on the forces of openness – globalization and cyberspace – that will eventually force light on this hidden realm. To these critics, there is something inherently dishonest, and morally suspect in a city that so delights in pure show. It is no doubt true that the dualism of luminosity and shade that exists in Shanghai allows for nefarious dealings, and the growth of a power that is corrupt and unchecked. Yet, there is also a certain liberty in the acceptance that there is life in the shadows that does not need to be brought to light. The darkness provides space and freedom (if not power) not only for those at the top of society, but also for those at the bottom. The Shanghai spectacle, with its concentration on the surface, can, at least sometimes, produce toleration for the messy markets that thrive alongside and underneath the spectacular skyline.

In the lead up to expo, a widely publicized anti-piracy campaign led to a frenzy of reconstruction inside the cities DVD stores. Proprietors well versed in the customs of face, converted the front of their stores into legitimate businesses – some sold sweaters and bags, others stocked their shelves with the few legitimate DVDs that are available inside the country (mostly Chinese movies and films from Hollywood’s classical age). Behind this front they all installed fake doors. Customers looking for illicit goods were ushered in to the back where the real goods were being sold. Though some of these stores were busted,¹² the deception was hardly a secret. Instead, it was a clever arrangement serving a multiplicity of interests. Officials didn’t have to lose face from the flagrant piracy in the city, businesses didn’t have to shut down and customers could continue watching movies. The day Expo ended all the DVD stores in the city closed for renovation. The fake walls and doors were taken down and business as usual resumed.

These types of arrangements – so strange to Western eyes – are what allow Shanghai’s spectacle to co-exist with its street life. When spectacle is contained, relegated to its place, the Potemkin village ceases to be a shameful disguise. Instead, it enables a productive dualism that can awe and attract whilst still allowing for the flourishing existence of a hidden realm. This gray or shadow economy – so vital to Shanghai’s rise – is thus supported by the blindness that comes from all

the urban gloss. It cannot function if all is brought to light. Critics should remember that to insist on penetrating the surface, to hope for face-to-face confrontation, runs the danger of destroying all that needs the darkness to survive.

The best way to see Pudong is to ascend one of its super tall towers. Chose a skyscraper and take an elevator to the top. Turn your gaze away from the alien city-scape growing on the other side of the river and look down on Pudong. The highrise towers are all clustered around the rivers edge and along Century Avenue, the districts central axis. Off these main strips are rows and rows of 5 to 6 story white box apartment buildings all with red or blue roofs, a sim-city labyrinth that stretches on for miles. The only way to explore them is at street level. Back down on the ground, turn off the main boulevards and walk a block or even less. The landscape is still dominated by the towers but here, hidden from sight, an altogether different urban fabric emerges. The apartment blocks are all housing communities built 20, 30 even 60 years ago. In and around them are the small streets that everywhere support life in the 21st century Asian metropolis. The roads – no longer super-wide empty boulevards – are lined with micro businesses, small restaurants selling *xiaolongbao* – Shanghai’s famous special dumplings, noodles and breakfast *bings*. Inside a warehouse, at the back of an alley is the wet market with fresh fruit and vegetables that are biked in from the farms just out of town. These occupy colorful stands that sit alongside the buckets of slithering snakes and sacks somnolent toads. Inside the tenement alleyways residents sit on lawn chairs shelling peas, playing cards, drinking tea. Though still in the heart of Lujiazui, the glamour and gloss seem far, far away. Here, just 5 minutes away from the city’s most momentous spectacle are the small neighborhoods and communities that exist not for show, but for the people who live in them. Most visitors, taken in by the façade, do not bother to come here. These side streets are kept backstage. They are not part of the main display. Yet, sometimes, due to their tight proximity, their influence seeps through. Back on Century Avenue an electronic sound-scape fills the air, the source is a migrant vendor that has rigged up his bike with a makeshift sound system. He is using his ad-hoc mobile stereo to advertise his wares, a suitcase stuffed with pirated CDs.

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Notes

- ¹ This image can be found in multiple locations. Here is one:
<http://twistedifter.com/2011/01/picture-of-the-day-shanghai-1990-vs-2010/>
- ² The Jingpai (Beijing culture), Haipai (Shanghai culture) debate has been extends back over a year. For more see Lynn Pan. *Shanghai Style: Art and Design Between the War*, Long River Press (2008).
- ³ One branding expert told me that the cost of a luxury brand operating a store in a mall on Nanjing road is almost the same as having a giant banner ad. The empty stores, therefore, make sense purely from an advertising perspective.
- ⁴ The attempt to create a more civilized city for Shanghai's World Expo 2010 involved a campaign to stop people from wearing pajamas on the street (a local habit). This provoked an interesting backlash from people who argued that outdoor pajama wearing was a vital part of Shanghai culture. See Gao Yubing The Pajama Game Closes in Shanghai. *New York Times* (May 16, 2010) <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/17/opinion/17gao.html>
- ⁵ The destruction wrought by spectacle can be seen, for example on Wujiang Lu, which used to be one of the best places in the city for street food and is now filled with fast food chains.
- ⁶ This is not to question Huang's argument. Undoubtedly China implemented economic policies that were friendly to the private entrepreneur in the 80s that were later reversed in the 1990s
- ⁷ This aspect of Braudel's work has been taken up more recently by materialist philosophers inspired by the work produced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. See especially Manuel Delanda. "Markets, Antimarkets and Network Economics." <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/host/delanda/pages/markets.htm>
- ⁸ A sampling of stories on chengguang, violence and urban unrest can be found here: http://www.economist.com/node/15806697?story_id=E1_TVRDGGJS; http://shanghaiist.com/2011/04/14/showdown_between_police_and_crowds.ph
- ⁹ Drawing on the ancient commentary of Guo Xiang (AD 252-312) Hans-Georg Moeller argues that common translations of the butterfly dream misread the fable and give it a Western interpretation by adding in a constant subject -- the 'I', who dreams, remembers and doubts. See Hans-Georg Moeller "Zhuangzi's Dream of the Butterfly—a Daoist interpretation." *Philosophy East and West*. Volume 49, Number 4 (Oct 1999).
- ¹⁰ For more on China's contemporary liberal theorists see *One China. Many Paths*. Edited by Chaohua Wang. Verso (2005).
- ¹¹ On China as a mafia state see http://shanghaiist.com/2011/04/17/john_garnaut_is_china_becoming_a_ma.php
- ¹² Expo brought an end to the great hub of DVD stores on Dagu Lu, though at least one of these has simply moved around the corner.

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