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# Shanghai: Unleashing creative potential

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## Abstract

*In its pre-Communist heyday, Shanghai was an astute marketer that captured the hearts and minds of the great artists, writers and entrepreneurs of the times, people like Charlie Chaplin, Aldous Huxley and Noël Coward. Shanghai was the greatest city in Asia — alive, colourful, intoxicating — an archetype of modernity. During the last 20 years or so, in efforts to re-establish itself as world-class, a massive programme of urban regeneration has got underway. Skyscrapers and glitzy towers have sprung up across the skyline at breakneck speed creating a formidable 'outer force'. But great cities are more than physical infrastructure. A city sparkles not through its metal joists and marble casings, but when its own arts and culture are allowed to shine through, the embodiments of the imagination of its people. In pre-Communist, colonial days, Shanghai's own indigenous culture flourished. The city was a beacon that drew talent from every corner of the world. This paper traces the development of Shanghai from its beginnings in the 11th century as a tiny fishing village situated on the west bank of the Huangpu River to the shimmering riot of towers and glass that is the city today, and argues that its melting pot past has left a legacy on the city and its people: a hunger to absorb advancements from abroad. Today, this permeability is sapping the city's own creativity: its unique culture and traditions are sinking under external influences. Shanghai must begin the task of nourishing this inner force — the imagination of its people. The author looks at what can be done to set in place the conditions to unleash the innate creativity of the people of Shanghai.*

## INTRODUCTION

Shanghai is a city with the potential, once again, to sit alongside New York and London if it can overcome the obstacles in its path. In 1982, the green light was given to rebuild the city and reignite people's passions for the place. The vision was exciting and ambitious. The challenge was much greater than simply restoring the grandeur and magnificence of the colonial architecture — it was to create a model city and environment for the rest of the world

to admire and seek to emulate. The strategy was to market the dream at the outset through the creation of symbols and icons to signify prosperity and a return to modernity.

How a city is perceived, the image it creates of its physical and environmental desirability, affects not only the levels of investment by property developers and companies, but also the decisions of employers and employees to live and work there. Intuitive marketers recognise the importance of

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creating the vista at the earliest opportunity.

Shanghai was a symbol of modernity in the 1930s and 1940s, and further to its reopening in 1990 it has been viewed by the rest of China and the world as a place of immense opportunity, both cultural and economic. Yet despite appearances, the city has thus far failed to live up to expectations, with a lack of political autonomy and problems in the quality of life creating major obstacles to growth. But there is another issue. In the information age, the challenge for cities is to nourish the imagination of its citizens. Economic prosperity and competitiveness depend not only upon a city's links with the outside world through IT and the transport infrastructure. They also depend on its capacity to build new business and exploit innovation.

In pre-Communist days, Shanghai was inhabited by citizens of every nation in the world, but that has left a legacy on the city as it strives to embrace global capitalism — its citizens now hold the belief that economic success depends on the city's ability to readily absorb advancements from abroad. Such unquestioning permeability has resulted in the city's own indigenous culture sinking under external influences.

The impact of a vibrant cultural scene within the knowledge economy cannot be underestimated. Arts and culture are major embodiments of the human imagination and they breathe life into a city. They enhance the environment, stimulate thinking and build an image that brings in investment and talent from outside. A rich arts and cultural scene creates a buzz towards which the greatest minds gravitate. This is the final challenge for

Shanghai: to set in place the conditions that will fire the imagination of its citizens.

### **BREAKING PATTERNS: UNDOING LESSONS FROM THE PAST**

Shanghai was founded in the 11th century as a tiny fishing settlement on the west bank of the Huangpu River, and so it remained for several centuries. By the 16th century the town had grown into a small sea port with a booming cotton industry. In 1842 the city was invaded by the British in the first opium war. In defeat, Shanghai was named one of the five treaty ports open to foreign occupation. The main portions of the city were divided into the British-dominated international settlement and the French concession, and new inhabitants were granted special privileges — extra-territoriality — or, in other words, freedom from prosecution under Chinese law. Shanghai emerged from the shadow of greed and defeat, to become the richest, most sophisticated and powerful city in all Asia, on a parity with Paris, New York and London.

Neither a colony nor wholly owned by China, Shanghai was an anomaly among cities. As the only port in the world that required neither entry visas nor passports, it became a magnet for tens of thousands of foreigners, from Jews and missionaries to businessmen and traders. Nowhere else in the world afforded greater opportunity for the free-spirited entrepreneur.

By the 1930s and 1940s, Shanghai had spread its stardust around the world. The image it created was one of mystery and adventure, great wealth and adversity, and licence of every

kind, a place where musicians and intellectuals rubbed shoulders with gangsters and drug barons in the night clubs, gambling dens and back alleys. No cruise itinerary was complete without a stop at the 'Paris of the Orient'.

By 1949, Communism had shut the door on the metropolis and its liberal past. The foreigners left the factories and businesses were slowly nationalised. Orthodox Communism began to loosen its grip after Mao's death in 1976, and two years later Deng Xiaoping returned to power, setting the country on its gradual process of reform and opening up to the world. In the early 1990s, the focus for reform was Shanghai. Pudong was established as the centre of finance, and the city's economy began to grow at more than 20 per cent per annum.

A massive programme of redevelopment began which changed the face of central areas that, until 1990, were almost exactly as they had been in pre-Communist days. Old buildings were restored and renovated. Cafés, restaurants, theatres and cinemas, ossified under Communism, opened for business with their Western names back up above the door. Shanghai's famous Red Mansion Coffee House was 'Chez Louis' once more. The Old Man Jazz Band began to perform all year round in the Peace Hotel. But perhaps the most impressive transformation of all was the skyline. Expressions of Shanghai's aspirations shot up across the sky at an astonishing pace, and, in just 15 years of economic boom time, Shanghai has achieved a skyline that took 50 years to create in New York and 30 in Hong Kong. Today the city has more than 4,500 towers including the world's tallest hotel, and construction is

underway on what city planners claim will be the world's tallest building, a 492-metre, 101-storey tower with a gaping hole or 'moon gate'<sup>1</sup> cut out of the middle. The city also boasts the world's largest container port, the longest steel-arch bridge, the first high-speed magnetic levitation (maglev) train to operate commercially and, by 2005, Shanghai will be home to the world's biggest Ferris wheel.

### THE IMPERATIVE TO BUILD

From the pyramids to Stonehenge, civilisations have always used buildings to impress. The Romans and Greeks overawed those they conquered with great constructions: religious orders erected churches and temples to inspire reverence and piety. Leaders through history have used monuments to symbolise might and generate allegiance, as well as to convey an image of financial wealth and material success.

The expressive potential for building vertically was articulated by Louis Sullivan in his 1896 essay<sup>2</sup> entitled 'The tall office building artistically considered', published shortly after William Le Baron Jenny's eight-storey Leitner Building was built. Sullivan identifies 'loftiness' as the conceit of tall buildings both in a literal sense and as a metaphor for its symbolic intent.

With a ravenous hunger for modernity and an aspiration loftier than most, Shanghai propelled itself into the skies in an act of image-building on a grand scale. But with a population of around 17 million, of which 8 million live in the city proper, 3 million people are still living in very crowded conditions with inadequate access to drinking water and sanitation. The reality of Shanghai, the inside, is lagging behind

its shiny exterior, but there are signs that things are beginning to change.

### TAKING STOCK

Deyan Sudjic, author of 'The Hundred Mile City'<sup>3</sup> has noted that one thing all the great cities of the world appear to have in common is that they 'belong to a self-selected group that organise their futures'.<sup>4</sup> Mayors with political leadership such as Giuliani in New York, and perhaps now in London, which has for the first time elected a mayor for Greater London, can make all the difference. Barcelona has been fortunate to have a string of visionary mayors. Even more effective, argues Sudjic, are the national leaders who concentrate their efforts on capital cities, Mahathir in Kuala Lumpur, Mitterand in Paris. A lack of independence from a central controlling force whose concerns are spread thinly across a nation dampen a city's vitality and weaken its spirit.

In 2001, grass roots democracy expanded from rural parts of China to urban areas, a move described by sociologists as a breakthrough in the country's political system. For the first time on the Chinese mainland, thousands of residents in several cities including Shanghai elected their community councils and leading council officials. As China's post-World Trade Organization aspirations play out and the regions are granted greater political autonomy, cities and civic leaders are beginning to respond to the emotional and spiritual needs of citizens.

Work has already begun on plans to triple green space by 2020 from 3.6 to 10.0 square metres per inhabitant. There are more plans to lower the height of new buildings as well as to reduce neighbourhood density, and

greater emphasis is being placed on the preservation of historical buildings. This new approach by the city finds expression in the new goal it has defined for itself, to 'create a harmonious ecological environment for human beings, to establish a 21st-century metropolis'.

'The ultimate objective of urbanisation is to allow people to enjoy better lives, and key to that is environmental improvement', says Professor Zhu Linchu, deputy director-general of the Shanghai Government's development research centre. 'We want to have an ecological city based on human needs.'<sup>5</sup>

The city's recent win to host the 2010 World Expo with its focus on revitalising cities will move it closer to achieving its aims. Bid proposals include a pledge by the mayor to invest around US\$3bn in transport and infrastructure development ahead of the event, with up to ten times more expected to be spent on related infrastructure projects. Many projects had been in the pipeline long before the final vote.

### THE HUMAN FACTOR

A city's economic success relies, however, on more than environmental sensitivity and quality of life. In all the major developed cities of the world, core growth is based on the knowledge industries. The metropolis has been replaced by 'ideopolis'<sup>6</sup> in which economic prosperity and competitiveness depends not on the ability to make things, but in generating ideas that can be sold to the world. In this age of intellectual capital, both insight and innovation are more highly prized than physical wealth or infrastructure. A

city's schools and universities play a central role because they generate intellectual capital, invigorate culture, and feed ideas into the business community. At the same time, the arts and cultural scene must be nurtured: arts and culture create a training ground for the imagination, and generate for the city an image and a reputation that will help attract investment and talented individuals — great minds are drawn towards environments that are vital and creative. The challenge for the modern-day city is to harness the innate creativity of its citizens.

Shanghai's education system, although greatly improved, is still dogged by rote learning. As Professor Hanmin Zhou, Deputy Chief Commissioner of the Pudong People's Government, explained: 'We need an education system where teachers no longer restrict creativity in our young people ... The people of Shanghai are all stuck at the neck of the bottle. There is so much potential there that is waiting to be released. What we have to do is to break the neck of this bottle that is holding us back ...'<sup>7</sup>

The outcome of the bottleneck is a city with an industry that is great at imitation and copying, making Shanghai and its surrounding areas the manufacturing centre of the world, but devoid of its own nationally and internationally competitive brand names. Only three local brand names of clothes — Kaikai, Hailuo and Shanshan — survive in the harsh competition. A Shanghai origin was once a major selling point for brands in China, promising quality and style in its products until the 1980s. Although the Government did inject financial and other support into the industry, the

effect was minimal due to the stifling of innovation by the central Government, whose strategy in the past was to vote in favour of the state-owned enterprises at the expense of privately owned enterprises.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, there is an art scene in Shanghai bordering a more generalised underground, but it is still muzzled by bureaucracy and censorship. At its centre is writer and club promoter Mian Mian, also known as Kika. Her frank, semi-autobiographical collection of short stories, 'La, La, La',<sup>9</sup> tells of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, and has made her a cult hero among China's Generation Y, but the volume was banned shortly after publication when Jiang Zemin was reported to have singled her out in a Politburo meeting as a 'decadent influence' on Chinese youth. Together with the notorious DJ Coco Zhao, one of China's few publicly gay figures, Mian Mian promotes club nights in the city showcasing the best of new Chinese artists and music.

The lack of a substantial arts culture is not because Shanghai people do not like art. In the 1920s and 1930s, Shanghai was the artistic centre of China, favoured by intellectuals and creatives from every discipline for its freedom of expression and the opportunities it presented to connect with Western and Japanese styles. But that rich mix of influences has left a legacy that is disabling Shanghai's culture, for the city's residents would now rather assimilate international culture than anything quirky or local.

The free spirit of old Shanghai has left its mark on its citizens, and the city remains a beacon for entrepreneurs and thinkers both inside and outside China. The head offices of the major media

and advertising services around the globe have planted their China offices in the city centre, and it has become the testing ground for new products. As Professor Zhou says, 'Once you make it in Shanghai, you are a brand for ever.'<sup>10</sup> But without a strong culture that supports local tradition and innovation, in any field, fertile imaginations will begin to seek sustenance elsewhere.

### EVERY GREAT CITY NEEDS ITS SOHO

In 20 years of development since reform, Shanghai has moved away from the post-industrial era to the information era, and is beginning to acknowledge that its greatest assets are its citizens. The city's efforts in respect of the World Expo 2010 will leave its 17 million residents with a substantial legacy allowing them to enjoy a better quality of life, improved housing, more open space and an expanded green belt. But for the city to really flourish, to sit alongside London and New York, the innate creativity of the people must now be unleashed.

Perhaps it is the task of the business community as well as the Government to inspire in the people a desire to preserve and develop their own unique culture and sub-culture. Business and civic leaders should set aside and hand over to the people the old theatres and municipal buildings, dance halls and casinos. These could then be the focal point for the city's burgeoning arts scene, for its poetry festivals, art shows, operas, open-mike sessions, plays, stand-up comedians, dance and music festivals, and so on, for expressions of the creativity that resides in the people.

The new emerging middle class in

Shanghai is setting its sights on its offspring becoming lawyers, doctors or accountants, but it is important that the children themselves feel that they can follow the less conventional roads taken by the great writers, artists and poets that preceded them. Every city needs its Soho — its eccentrics, its poets and painters, its citizens who choose to follow a different path — as well as its high life and glitz. By over-aspiring, the people of Shanghai may well be under-achieving in the creative disciplines, and it is in those disciplines that Shanghai needs its stars.

Shanghai now must substantiate the glossy face it paints for the world with an even stronger, more vital, inner core. In recent times it has been held back by the lack of political autonomy, but things are changing post-World Trade Organization. The city that was once bound up in aspiration must now attempt to imbue its inside, its people, with the same shining confidence that fills its skyline. It must grant the licence to unleash the creative spirit — to give to the artists, inventors, poets and musicians the physical and symbolic space to create.

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