

Urban Revolution and the 'Chinese Century'

LESLIE SKLAIR

Thomas Campanella. *The Concrete Dragon: China's Urban Revolution and What it Means for the World*. Princeton Architectural Press, 2008.

Xiangming Chen. *Shanghai Rising: State Power and Local Transformations in a Global Megacity*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Since the 1980s, China has built more skyscrapers; more office buildings; more shopping malls and hotels; more housing estates and gated communities; more highways, bridges, subways, and tunnels; more public parks, playgrounds, squares, and plazas; more golf courses and resorts and theme parks than any other nation on earth—indeed, than probably all other nations combined (Campanella 14).

These words, from the Introduction of Thomas Campanella's brilliant book, decisively set the scene for what can truly be described as the world-historical phenomenon of how the Chinese authorities working closely with local and transnational entrepreneurs of various types have stormed into the twenty-first century. This clearly has formidable implications for what is widely predicted to become the 'Chinese century'. Campanella begins his story in the Pearl River Delta, around the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SSEZ), where Deng Xiaoping famously delivered his speech encouraging the acquisition of wealth and the flowering of a new consumer society, prompting a radical shift of policy from the Maoist austerity that had characterized the People's Republic in the decades since 1949. Deng issued his historic free market call in January 1992 from the first skyscraper in Shenzhen, the International Foreign Trade Center (opened in 1985), which was the tallest building in China at the time. Two significant facts about this can be conceptualized as the structural foundations of what was to follow over the next twenty years. First, the IFTC had been built by the Army Engineer Corps, transferred to the SSEZ after finishing their reconstruction work from the Tangshan earthquake of 1976. And second, the building had been modeled on Gordon Wu's Hopewell Centre in Hong Kong, a 'building type rapidly replicated throughout China' in the 1980s and thereafter (ibid 36). It was from there that the Canton-Shenzhen Expressway (built by a company founded by the Princeton-educated Wu and inspired by the New Jersey turnpike) began the transformation of the Pearl River Delta into a global economic hub. Campanella argues (in one of his few forays into theorization), with a nod to

Manuel Castells, that this was not the traditional BosWash corridor metropolis, but a new type of integrated global space of flows. The impact of these political and infrastructural changes on the Pearl River Delta, spreading out like ever-increasing ripples in ever-multiplying ponds throughout urban China into more or less all corners of the global economy, is quite spectacular.

Campanella provides a wealth of detail on Shanghai, Beijing and other globalizing cities in China to support his central theme. In each case, he is mindful of the need to address issues of agency (members of urban growth coalitions of various types), as well as economic and political structures (the different ways in which institutional arrangements were modified and/or transformed to accommodate the new policies and commercial opportunities). Framing all these momentous changes is not only the so-called open door policy which kick-started the process with the economic processing zones in the 1980s, but crucially what I have elsewhere conceptualized as the culture-ideology of consumerism, that characterizes both capitalist globalization and market socialism in China over recent decades (Sklair 2002). Campanella's book is certainly the best available account of the material foundations on which the culture-ideology of consumerism in China rests.

While many of the factions in the Chinese leadership often justify their apparently capitalistic policies in terms of "market socialism with Chinese characteristics," Campanella provides ample evidence to demonstrate exactly how important "opening up to the outside world" has been in the process of transforming China's cities. In the case of Shanghai, he focuses on the deliberate use of iconic architecture to validate the claims of the urban boosters that the city today (termed the Paris of the Orient in the 1930s) can rightfully reclaim its status, lost during the Maoist years, as a global city. "Entering the lobby of the Expo Center [Shanghai Urban Planning Exposition Center] a visitor is greeted by a monumental gilded sculpture of the city's iconic buildings, a kind of architectural gilded calf that slowly rotates on a pedestal, flooded worshipfully with lights" (ibid 57; see also Krupar 2008). As most urbanists and many architects know, the Pudong district across the river from the Bund, led the way in the 1990s, driven by the entrepreneurial mayor Zhu Rongji. What is less well-known is that he and his team brought in French consultants, notably Joseph Belmont, a key figure in the *grands projets* in Paris. The Pearl TV tower, the first iconic structure in Pudong, was dubbed the Eiffel Tower of Shanghai. A more recent and as yet incomplete development is the One City Nine Towns project around Shanghai which seems to make a virtue or at least a selling point of colonial urban design (ibid 88-91).

Similarly informative and lively chapters follow on Beijing, a city manufactured over the centuries and redesigned after 1949, first along Soviet lines, then by Maoist plan-

ners whose projects resulted in the destruction of city walls and the narrow lanes of the *hutongs*. Thus, much of the old city was taken over by government buildings (see Broudehoux 2002). The Olympics in Beijing (2008) brought a new wave of building, restoration, destruction and relocation (the firm of Albert Speer Jr. has been involved in the vast Olympic Green project as well as in Shanghai). Like Shanghai, the urban growth coalition in Beijing has learned the lesson of the importance of iconic architecture for global city credentials (see Sklair 2006). Three buildings stand out in this regard, all built by Western architect firms in joint ventures with Chinese firms. First and second, the Olympic stadium (Bird's Nest by Herzog and de Meuron) and the Aquatics Centre (PTW and Arup), and third, Rem Koolhaas's CCTV building of which Campanella opines: "[i]f any of Beijing's new signature buildings has potential to become a city icon, this is it" (136). Despite the opposition of architectural and cultural elites, this already appears to be happening.

Campanella does not duck the highly contentious issue of who benefits and who suffers from all this urban destruction and reconstruction. The winners are the new entrepreneurial elites, inside and outside the communist party hierarchy and the yuppies who have rapidly adjusted to the new lifestyle choices available to those with sufficient disposable income, with a good contingent of cultural elites in their ranks. The losers are those whose lives are blighted, in some cases totally destroyed by the *chai*: the dreaded sign of 'demolition' that has displaced hundreds of thousands of people to enrich corrupt developers and officials. A major consequence of this urban revolution and accompanying changes in the rural sector has been the largest increases in migration and urbanization in human history as changes in residential regulation permitted peasants to flock to the cities.

The book concludes with three chapters providing much evidence for the culture-ideology of consumerism thesis. The first, on "Suburbanization and the Mechanics of Sprawl," argues that the spatial forms of the communist-era *danwei* (work unit) system themselves reproduce courtyard housing, the ancestral form of Chinese urbanism. While the consumerist revolution has created some US-style gated communities in China, much more common are gated estates of up-market apartment buildings, denser and more urban than those found in the US or Europe. Most have English names and lifestyle symbolism, though there are also many local references, for example the Commune by the Great Wall project of the Beijing design firm SOHO China, unveiled at the Venice Biennale in 2004 and not a million miles in design from the Case Study Program houses in California of the 1940s. It is unclear whether the 'Commune' reference is ironic, given that the Case Study Program was originally intended as low cost housing but the remaining houses are now mostly highly sought expensive commodities. Commune by the Great Wall houses are certainly not intended for the low cost market. The next chapter, "Driving the Capitalist

Road,” demonstrates that China is now the fastest-growing and will soon be the biggest automobile market and producer in the world, and that it already has the most infrastructure of any country in the world. Automobile culture has swiftly followed the material infrastructure with Wal-Mart, KFC, B&Q et al. all active in Chinese car-borne retail commerce. The final chapter, “Theme Parks and the Landscapes of Consumption,” shows how every desire of capitalist consumerism is catered for; for example, the ski resort recently created in Beijing, a joint venture of a Canadian refrigeration firm and the architecture department at Tsinghua University. No doubt, in these times of economic crisis for the universities all over the world, other seats of learning might wish to investigate similar commercial ventures. Heritage theme parks have been very popular in China for decades and their popularity shows no sign of waning as new entrants to the market reach higher and higher levels of spectacle. The Pearl River Delta led the way with Splendid China, Folk Culture Villages, and Window of the World in Shenzhen, and the South China Mall in nearby Dongguan (the ‘First Super-mega Theme Shopping Park of China’) replete with its own *Arc de Triomphe*, Caribbean, Italian, and Egyptian quarters – the biggest in the world, but not for long. The Xintiandi (New Heaven and Earth) shopping district in Shanghai, opened in 2001 and now reproduced all over China, has achieved the status of a mimetic icon, with enough Chinese gentrified relics to please the tourists and trendy venues to please the locals (and/or *vice versa*). In addition, ‘new historic districts’ are being built from scratch, as in Dalian, with its own huge Bavarian castle for *feng shui*! Unlikely as this might sound, there is a picture facing p. 270 that seems to prove it.

Campanella revisits theory in a brief Epilogue on the theme of “China Reinvents the City.” He argues that there are six defining characteristics of the new Chinese cityscape. These are speed, originating in the remarkable architectural phenomenon labeled Shenzhen tempo (see Chung et al. 2001); scale (everything has to be big); spectacle (dazzle and awe); sprawl (China, though enormous, is land hungry, due to vast swathes of inhospitable terrain in the west); class segregation (hundreds of millions of migrant workers); and sustainability (a long tradition in China and seriously pursued despite the contradictions of the present administration). All these characteristics, with the exception of the last, are well supported in the book, but they do not constitute a fully articulated theory of the new urbanism in China, nor do they substantiate the thesis that China is truly re-inventing the city. Nevertheless, without this book, it will not be possible to fully articulate such a theory, and this is what makes this book remarkable.

Compared with Campanella, Xiangming Chen’s edited volume is a much more modest venture, suffering from the common problems of edited volumes (uneven focus, varying levels of analysis, and strict relevance). But there are some redeeming features. The editor, in his Preface and Introduction, cites the frequency of terms like ‘hot’ and

'sizzling' used to describe Shanghai to illustrate the thesis that it is a "timely urban laboratory for understanding how local transformations occur in global or globalizing cities as a combined function of global impact and state power" (Chen xx). While he does highlight the role of transnational corporations and foreign direct investment in these processes, few of the other contributors expand on this and there is little recognition of the impact of specific foreign actors and institutions.

The book is divided into two rather unequal parts. Part I, on "Global Cities West and East," is opened by Saskia Sassen, with a essay whose contents will be familiar to all those who know her work on the global city and while there is very little on Shanghai as such, she does offer a useful list of hypotheses to assess the extent to which Shanghai is a global city. This challenge, unfortunately, is not picked up in any systematic fashion in the rest of the book. Chapter 2, by Ann Markusen and Pingkang Yu, analyzes the relationship between high-tech activity and urban economic development in the United States but, again, the implications for Shanghai are explored only very briefly in general terms. Chapter 3 on aerotropolis development by John Kasarda comes across as more urban boosterism predicated on expensive airports rather than cool scholarly analysis, totally ignoring the ecological consequences of having consumer goods flown in on a daily basis to stock the shelves in the effort to make Shanghai "China's True Gateway City." Chapters 4 and 5 pose the questions: can Shanghai learn from Singapore (K.C. Ho) and/or Hong Kong (Tai-lok Lui and Stephen Chiu)? These are both informative essays and start to engage with issues that are the topic of Part Two, "Globalization and the Local Transformation of Shanghai." The five chapters in this second section range widely, covering local governance, the Telecom sector, community (re)building, and local consumption of global brands. None of these chapters really gets to grips with the more analytic issues raised by the editor in his introduction (Chen also contributes to the last two chapters and writes a concluding chapter) and by Sassen or for that matter with many of the issues raised by Campanella, a possible exception being chapter 9 on community (re)building, by Hanlong Lu, Yuan Ren and Xiangmin Chen which does engage briefly with the development of the Shanghai shopping and entertainment district, *Xintiandi*.

On the whole, the focus of this edited volume is fuzzy rather than sharp and while several of the chapters do illuminate the phenomenon of 'Shanghai Rising', the book as a whole does not seem to me to justify the large claims by the editor in his concluding chapter of having achieved integrated and theoretical understanding. What is, however, undeniable is that there is something very important happening in China, particularly but not exclusively in its major cities, and that this may well have fundamental consequences for the rest of the world.

Works Cited

Broudehoux, Anne-Marie. *The Making and Selling of Post-Mao Beijing*. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.

Chung, Chinua Judy, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, and Sze Tsung Leong. *Great Leap Forward*. Cambridge MA: Harvard Design School, 2001. Print.

Krupar, Shiloh R. "Shanghaiing the Future: A De-tour of the Shanghai Urban Planning Exhibition Hall." *Public Culture* 20.2 (2008): 307-20. Print.

Sklair, Leslie. *Globalization: Capitalism and its Alternatives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Print.

---. "Iconic Architecture and the Culture-Ideology of Consumerism." *Theory, Culture and Society* 27.5 (2009): 135-149. Print.

Leslie Sklair is Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Associate Faculty in the Cities Programme at the London School of Economics, and President of the Global Studies Association (UK). Editions of his *Globalization: Capitalism and its Alternatives* (2002) have been translated into Japanese, Portuguese, Persian, Spanish and Korean with an Arabic edition forthcoming. *The Transnational Capitalist Class* was published in 2001 (Chinese edition 2002 and selections in German, 2009). He has published on the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, and his current research focuses on iconic architecture and capitalist globalization.