

## **THE SHANGHAI PARADOX**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper outlines my ongoing research on the use of traditional symbolism and its utilisation in contemporary architecture of the Chinese global city. It specifically examines the landmark architecture of the Pudong, or the “new” Shanghai. Is there a contradiction in imagery when architects adopt traditional motifs in contemporary skyscraper architecture? Designs such as Cesar Pelli’s Petronas Towers (1994) in Kuala Lumpur use traditional Islamic patterns in the floor plans and façade detail. However, in the case of Shanghai, the three landmark buildings of the Pudong as shown in Figure 1; the Jin Mao Tower (1999), the Shanghai World Financial Centre (2008) and the Shanghai Tower (under construction at the time of writing), all reference fengshui and cosmology. The paradox in this case is that under law of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), geomancy, including fengshui and cosmological symbolism, is defined as a feudal superstition and its practice illegal<sup>1</sup>.

This paradox occurs due to the widespread use and reliance on fengshui narratives in contemporary Chinese architecture, the purpose of which is cultural signification. Using traditional practices and symbols, fengshui and cosmology become part of the design statement and the imagery of the building. Furthermore, while fengshui plays a role in the beliefs of many Chinese people, the value given to, and the recognition of signs and symbols are different to the various communities that make up greater China. Anthropologist Allen Chun writes in great detail about the complexity of defining “Chineseness”<sup>2</sup>. Within the desire to localise architecture in major urban centres, architects need to be careful not to be naïve when relying on overarching assumptions about an appropriate symbol of Chinese culture.

Fengshui is an ancient historical Chinese philosophical system that was traditionally implemented to inform the selection of auspicious sites intended for the location of dwellings and graves. Its purpose was to create a harmonious relationship between heaven and earth, the gods and humans. Over time it has been ritualised and now globalised. The Chinese characters feng (wind) and shui (water) comprise the single linguistic term fengshui. The definition of fengshui varies from ‘geomantic omen’<sup>3</sup>, to more detailed definitions such as Feuchtwang’s “Feng (wind) + Shui (water), as a single term stands for the power of the environment ... Behind it is a whole cosmology of metaphysical concepts and symbols. By placing oneself well in the environment fengshui will bring good fortune”<sup>4</sup>. Fengshui developed within a Chinese agrarian society as an adaptive response to the local environment. It is not a singular and coherent practice. Even from its earliest development, fengshui was a dual system — one technique used land formation and the other used the compass — to determine the qi (life force) of a particular location. These methods of practice are termed “Classical fengshui”. The schools within the Classical tradition continue to evolve and adopt regional variations within China as well as other areas in East Asia. In addition to regional differences, the meaning and value placed upon fengshui can be uneven.

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Traditional imagery of the city has shifted from state and religious to a more corporate patronage. The skyscraper signifies the transition from older economies such as agrarian and industrial to service. The similarity in requirements in the function and accommodation of these cities provide homogenised environments. The differentiation of cities of cities has become reliant on the brandscape<sup>5</sup> and the marketing and branding of symbolism as a method of differentiation<sup>6</sup>.

Thus the experience of the city is no longer limited to physical interaction with the urban fabric. It incorporates an “imagined” or “hyperreal” environment. This imagining is integral to the marketing and advertising of place, with the purpose of promotion in the network of global city competition. Architecture in this case is a tool in the marketing and branding of place. There are many terms applied to this phenomenon – “Mediascape”<sup>7</sup>, “Mediatecture”<sup>8</sup>, “Brandscape”<sup>9</sup>, the “Themed Environment”<sup>10</sup>, or the “Culture of Consumption”<sup>11</sup> – all of which describe a vision of the city designed not only for function, but also for media consumption. Iconic buildings and skylines have become political and commercial devices for differentiation between cities so that we can automatically recognise, say, Hong Kong from Sydney, or Shanghai from New York.

Specific to Shanghai there are a number of key factors included in the reading of the symbolism that is common in many post industrial cities, but in this case with a Chinese twist. The development of the Pudong as the “new” Shanghai has developed at a rapid rate as the city transforms from an industrial economy to a service-based one. Shanghai was dubbed by Deng Xiaoping as “the head of the dragon”, to act as the financial centre of the PRC. Shanghai of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was designed as a window to modern China that the Chinese political leaders wanted as a reality for the nation as it entered its place as a world leader. The Pudong – the “new” Shanghai – was designed from a base of distinction from the colonial trade port of the late nineteenth, leading to the early twentieth century, and now as a centre for the world of commerce, trade and service.

The centrepiece of the Pudong is the Lujiazui Financial District (LFD). Set on the opposite riverbank to the historic Bund, the focus of the LFD is the three super-tall towers: the Jin Mao Tower (JMT), Shanghai World Financial Centre (SWFC) and the Shanghai Tower (ST). All three of these towers were designed by American architectural practices and these three buildings have architects’ design statements that acknowledge the principles of fengshui and traditional of geomancy as being important to a means of identification and localisation. Some of the statements amount to a kind of “fengshui-wash” of the projects, not strong on content, or is it not strong on intent?

“Before” and “after” images of Shanghai have resonance with those of the “Southbank” or “Docklands” developments. Examples include the re-development of other river cities such as London and Melbourne, where warehousing and shipping stores were once located. In the case of the Pudong, this development was not only to house commerce and trade, but also to function as a sign, signifying that “China is open for business.” The Pudong was set up in direct competition with its own national cities, more especially Hong Kong, but significantly and most strikingly Shanghai re-emerged onto the world stage in a very short period of time.

The concern with “cultural sensitivity” in the design of the landmark buildings is evident in the architect’s design statements. All of the landmark buildings describe a fengshui narrative, complete with cosmological references, as proof of their “Chineseness”, and localisation of the architecture. They are on a world stage after all, and much of the rhetoric barely conceals the reality that these

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buildings are designed to impress, and underline their role as locating Shanghai as a world leading new city while demonstrating a conspicuous Chinese identity.

### The Jin Mao Tower

Architects Skidmore Owings and Merrill describe the design of the JMT as “... a landmark that represented the prosperity and wealth of Shanghai’s future but also embraced the most advanced design concept and technological innovation”<sup>12</sup>. In other words, it would be a “world’s best”, heroic by proportion, but have underlying Chinese qualities – in this case fengshui symbolism.

The translation of the name Jin Mao is “Golden Prosperity”, a name that resonates at all levels of Chinese culture, reflecting a desire for good fortune, health, luck, happiness, and mostly wealth. The building is located at 88 Century Avenue, and the building is 88 stories in height. The structural grid and setbacks devised by the project architect, Adrian Smith, were based on the use of the number eight.

Eight is significant in Chinese culture due to the extensive use of homonyms. The number eight is an extraordinarily auspicious number. Eight or “ba” in Mandarin Chinese sounds similar to “fa” which means to “prosper”. (This also has equivalence in Cantonese). Thus the repetition “88” equates to “double happiness”, and “888” is to “prosper, prosper, prosper”.

Smith reinterpreted the pagoda as a skyscraper<sup>13</sup>. The traditional purpose for a pagoda was to enhance the geomantic qualities of a particular area. To be correct, a pagoda should have an odd number of levels, not eighty-eight. The inference is that, if it looks about right, the actual numbering and geomantic characteristics become less an issue for contemporary high-rise towers. However, despite technical inaccuracies, the use of a superstitious device as an appropriate form for the first super tall skyscraper in the PRC is an interesting one.



*Figure 1 The landmark buildings of Lujiazui February 2014. Jin Mao Tower (centre), Shanghai World Financial Centre (left) and Shanghai Tower - under construction (right) Photograph by author*

As the first of the three landmark towers planned for the LFD, the JMT demonstrates a combination of modern global-city typology (the skyscraper), with postmodern motifs (historic and cultural references

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to Chinese culture). The use of geomantic form (the pagoda) and deference to cosmology/superstition (the substantial integration of “eight” into the design) is a paradoxical representation for a building that fronts the “new” Shanghai and places China on the world stage via its architecture. While there are successful precedent buildings that combine the modern skyscraper with traditional symbolism, in this case, considering the political location, these symbols can easily be deemed reactionary.

### Shanghai World Financial Centre

The second of the landmark buildings is the SWFC designed by American architects Kohn Pedersen Fox. The building opened in 2008, and until the “topping out” of the Shanghai Tower in October 2013, this building was the tallest in Shanghai. The developer for the project is the Japanese Mori Group. The original SWFC design had a circular aperture at the cap of the building, to represent the Chinese cosmological symbols of the round heaven and the square earth<sup>14</sup>. The aperture also assisted to reduce the structural loads of the building caused by wind pressure, and so it works on a number of prosaic and symbolic levels.

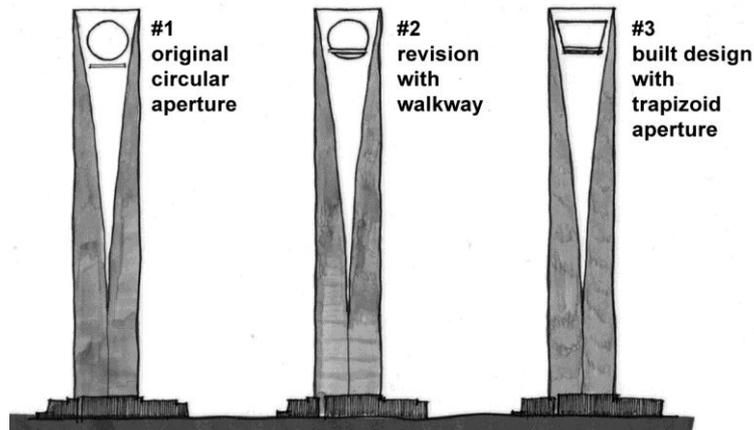


Figure 2 Evolution of the design of the SWFC aperture. Graphic by author

However, this original design quickly became controversial. The unintended reading of the design, when linked with the Japanese developer, was that the aperture resembled the “Rising Sun” of the Japanese flag. As the setting sun shone through the aperture of the building over Shanghai, the glow of a symbolic “Rising Sun” would be the most dominant, and tallest symbol in the Shanghai skyline when viewed from the old Shanghai. Adapted from Hurewitz, Figure 2 describes the design evolution of the aperture to the SWFC<sup>15</sup>.

Relations between Japan and China have developed in tension many times over hundreds of years. Memories of the Japanese invasion and occupation in the 1930s still inform contemporary relationships between the two nations, which are at best politically frosty and economically competitive. Opponents to the original design included the then Mayor of Shanghai Chen Ling Yu, who took exception to the resultant imagery, which clearly raised memories of the past, and would further sour Sino-Japanese relations. Amendments to the design included the introduction of a footbridge to break the purity of the circular form, however, the aperture was later significantly altered to the current trapezoid. Aside from design it is interesting that the architects remain intent on maintaining a cosmological reference in the design narrative.

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A square prism – the symbol used by the ancient Chinese to represent the earth – is intersected by two cosmic arcs, representing the heavens, as the tower ascends in a gesture to the sky. The interaction between these two realms gives rise to the building's form, carving a square portal at the top of the tower that lends balance to the structure and links the two opposing elements – the heavens and the earth. Soaring above the city skyline, the Shanghai World Financial Center stands as a symbol of commerce and culture that speaks to the city's emergence as a global capital... Ibid.

There are a few interesting points suggested here (aside from the fact that a trapezoid is not a square). The first is the acknowledgement that a Chinese cultural link is an important factor as the architects attempt to localise the building. The use of the circle and square is not an uncommon design device in contemporary architecture in Shanghai. The second is that the choice of localisation tool – cosmological symbolism – is this an appropriate decision for a city representing an atheistic government with a history of discrimination against old traditions and practices, in particular during the Cultural Revolution; and one that outlaws that practice of fengshui as a feudal superstition to this day (while paradoxically adopting all its benefits)?

### Shanghai Tower

The final of the landmark trio is the ST designed by Gensler architects. The building was topped out in August 2013 and is scheduled for completion in late 2014. In Gensler's 2008 press release for the building, the design statement noted that the building's form was a metaphor for the spirit and of Chinese philosophy. It referenced "the spiral as a symbol of the cosmos in Chinese culture"<sup>16</sup>. Aside from the fact that the spiral is not a symbol of the cosmos in Chinese culture; why was there a need to include anything about Chinese cosmology in the architectural design? There has since been a subsequent amendment to the design statement that now describes the spiral as symbolic of "the emergence of modern China as a global financial power"<sup>17</sup>.

While we associate the concept of fengshui with China, the actual practice - the ability to own, operate and advertise fengshui services within the PRC is illegal. While fengshui masters do work in China, they must do so from cities such as Hong Kong or Singapore. It is only through academia in the areas of architecture and anthropology that research of fengshui is permitted. Due to its status as a feudal superstition it is still considered contrary to notions of modernity for a contemporary world nation<sup>18</sup>. Fengshui has developed over millennia. It shares a common symbolic language that spans many disciplines, however, fengshui in the context of contemporary architecture in the PRC appears to have little to do with traditional practice and more with an interpretation of associated symbols. In its contemporary practice there is a greater distinction between traditional and classical applications, compared with more modern versions, or, as Architect and fengshui authority Cate Bramble has aptly dubbed "Mc Fengshui"<sup>19</sup>.

Since the earliest push for Modernity and in some part a Westernisation of Chinese culture, the process of modernisation became complicated because of a political, cultural and theoretical stance, that while there should be westernisation and modernisation – it should be undertaken with Chinese characteristics. Within this context, fengshui may be considered as a "quaint" Chinese practice, however it is still illegal, and still considered anti-modern. This perception has existed from the Republican Movement of the early twentieth century. Sun Yet Sen, in his "Three Stages of

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Revolution”, bundled fengshui and geomancy in with slavery, foot-binding and opium as significant deterrents to modernisation in China<sup>20</sup>.

Given the heterogeneity of function and appearance of the global cities, it is not unexpected that to distinguish one city from another requires an appreciation of locale and a particular cultural identity. These provide a label or a local brand of distinction, designed to set it above other cities in the global village. There have been many attempts to capture a “Chinese Essence” to reflect these notions in contemporary architecture. There is greater success in other genres of building design, such as IM Pei’s Suzhou Museum, than the design of skyscrapers, and in particular the super-talls with some type of Chinese characteristics is complex, without the result looking kitsch. The nature of this kind of building leaves limited room for representational manipulation, thus the use of symbolic motif - say of numbers of floors (88 being popular in China), decorative devices (such as the cap, or hat of the building), or the shape of the plan, are all used as a methods of cultural identification.

Two questions arise which require further research on my part. The first concerns the use of fengshui symbolism in this context, and whether this denotes a western interpretation of Chinese culture for consumption by an external audience (whether Chinese or not). When analysing the new architecture of the Pudong, and in particular the three landmark towers, a complexity arises with the use of architectural motif. Assumptions made about symbols that may at first appear to be appropriate, but may be in fact the opposite. In the case of the Jin Mao Building, the eighty-eight floors and an emphasis on the use of number eight was reported by the architect to be a client request and not part of a localisation agenda as per the use of the pagoda. Thus, as a client request is this a subversive act, or simply a reflection of deeply ingrained concepts within Chinese culture?

The second area of research concerns the processes of globality. Does the demand of globalisation and architectural imagery make this paradox just an interesting anomaly? Thus the application of these fengshui concepts, through interpretation or by process, inextricably changes the understanding of the Classical practice, and reinforces a McFengshui understanding or reduced picture of the practice.

We need to understand the notion of “What is Chinese?” This requires critical consideration. The issue is more complex when we take into account the illegal status of fengshui within the People’s Republic of China, despite its common and highly regarded practice at all levels of urban design, construction and placemaking in Chinese cities elsewhere. Chinese culture operates over a number of levels, it is not a simple society, sometimes static, other times led by legislative rule, and some of it harsh, sometimes revolutionary and in upheaval, and other times controlled by mutual and traditional practice, and fengshui is an exemplar of the latter.

In other Chinese cities, such as Singapore, fengshui masters are advertised as part of building projects and the use and practice of fengshui are given more promotion. Hong Kong is different again, while on one hand the city is known as the “epicentre” of fengshui, the narratives are more significant than the literal practice. However in the case of Shanghai, in the current political context, fengshui, geomancy, and cosmological references remain a paradox when represented in the skyline of this global city. On one hand the designs promote a sense of Chinese cultural identity (although which one?), but on the other hand, this endorsement is an illegal one.

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### ENDNOTES

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