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Jiang Wu  
Yan Ji  
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# Shanghai Urbanism at the Medium Scale

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# Shanghai Urbanism at the Medium Scale

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## Preface

This is a book about understanding and analysing real-world issues surrounding the current urbanisation of China. The five authors from China and Singapore bring with them multiple perspectives and experiences relating to the education, practice, research and administration of urban planning and design. This book has also benefitted from the two important Asian cities, cues and inspiration from Shanghai and Singapore, and two important universities – resources from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Tongji University.

The ideas and framework for this book were formed between August 2010 and July 2012. In these 2 years, I had taught urban design at NUS School of Design and Environment as a Visiting Associate Professor. I was continuously shuttling back and forth between Shanghai and Singapore as I was involved in teaching and practice in Shanghai as well. Hence, during this period of time, I had to constantly switch mindsets and perspectives between being an insider and outsider to China, as I held discussions with students and colleagues from both sides about Shanghai's urban planning and design. In this way, the framework and thinking behind this book took shape.

The three design studies selected for this publication (Shanghai EXPO's Puxi site, Xuhui District's waterfront area and Lingang New City) are all the best representations of Shanghai's large-scale urban regeneration and new city building. The city bears high hopes for these projects but also suffers from a lack of experiences in these areas. At the same time, these are also the projects which famous international design firms hope to participate in, due to their high level of complexity and great significance. However, in reality, many of the planning and design schemes in this kind of projects tend to be controversial, as many design firms, international and local alike, propose form-driven or personal concept-based schemes, so the unusual plans and designs become problematic. Thus, the attitude with which globalised yet not quite fully developed cities undergo large-scale planning and design is a crucial issue.

As I taught on this subject outside of China, one of the recurring challenges I faced was how to guide students to understand the city of Shanghai. For example, what should they be looking out for on a weeklong trip to the city? What professional methods of observation would be really helpful to their planning and design task? As I attempted to introduce Shanghai to these 'outsiders', I came to realise that as an 'insider', I did not understand my own city enough

either. This may be true for my colleagues who are busy at the forefront of Shanghai's urban planning, design and administration as well. Too often we are caught up in the whirlwind – in China's nearly chaotic state of urbanisation process, China's professionals, technical officers and researchers are tied up with facing the daily onslaught of wave upon wave of emerging deadlines. Although we are familiar with the city and each fragment of change that is taking place, we lack a consolidated, holistic and systematic study of the city's spatial model transformation and current status. This is one of the reasons why there is no specific implementation plan for the city's transition. This sense was only reinforced over time with my continuous switching of perspectives arising from the shuttling in and out of Shanghai.

My thinking resonated with Professor Jiang Wu, and Yan Ji from a professional practice viewpoint also agreed that there was value in researching for this purpose. Their support and involvement was a great impetus to the writing of this book. Our combination brought together several viewpoints including research, professional practice, planning administration and education. Each of us possessed experience studying and working abroad and also a deep involvement with Shanghai's planning practice. We hoped to work together to sort out this 'understanding' of the city, to create a useful, easily understood guide for people doing research, professional practice, administration and education that would provide a way of navigating and making sense of the information about Shanghai's urban spatial characteristics and the larger backdrop of China's urbanisation. Sara Li Ting Chan and Wei Qi Lim were students from one of the studios I conducted in Singapore. They were interested in this research and thinking, so over a span of 2 years, they repeatedly visited Shanghai to examine the city, using Tongji University as a base for study and research. They had discussions with the three mentors, conducted a closer analysis of the three design studies and participated in the interviews – without them, this book might not have materialised. Chapter 7 is the culmination of our studies and discussions at Shanghai, offered through their own eyes, in their own words.

I am grateful for the support given by both Tongji University and NUS and would specially like to thank Professor Zheng Shiling, Professor Wu Changfu and Professor Peng Zhenwei of Tongji University's College of Architecture and Urban Planning and Professor Heng Chye Kiang and Professor Wong Yunn Chii of NUS School of Design and Environment. Many thanks also to various supports I received in Shanghai, especially Shanghai Planning and Land Resource Administrative Bureau's Dr. Wang Lin, Shanghai Xuhui District Planning and Land Resource Administrative Bureau's Mr. Guan Yetong, Shui On Land's Mr. Albert Chan, Lingang New City's Mr. Gu Xiaoming and Mr. Tao Mingchang, Tongji University's Professor Tang Zilai, the master planner of Shanghai EXPO's Urban Best Practices Area (UBPA) and Professor Zhang Ming, the architect of Urban Pavilion in Shanghai EXPO's UBPA.

I would also like to acknowledge the work of Tongji University students Mr. Zhang Jia, Miss Xu Yingjia and Miss Zhao Lu for their assistance in the later stages of the publication. Thanks also to University of Hawaii's Mr. Questor

Lau; he helped proofread the book in the midst of his stressful studies at Tongji University.

The authors would like to highlight this book's multiplicity of viewpoints, its 'academic' yet easy reading nature and its focus on current real-world issues, in hope that this book will have practical value and prove to be helpful, to both Chinese and foreigners in related fields of urban planning, design and city building, in understanding the real Shanghai.

Shanghai, China  
December 20, 2013

Yongjie Sha



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## 1.1 The Need for Understanding Shanghai Urbanism

Shanghai is a rapidly growing financial centre. Her strategic position in China and the global economy is quickly gaining prominence, especially as a gateway to China. Shanghai is at once the door through which global capital, brands and talent are flowing into China and also the point of connection with the rest of the world for China's cities. Shanghai's speedy urbanisation since the 1990s certainly cannot fully represent the urbanisation situation in China's diverse cities. However, as her levels of urbanisation, globalisation, financial and social development are ahead of a vast majority of Chinese cities, Shanghai is often seen as a microcosm of contemporary Chinese urbanisation. The other Chinese cities often take Shanghai as a leading example, while global forces have made Shanghai the most important case study city of China's urbanisation.

Urbanisation is contemporary China's most important engine for financial growth. Although urbanisation is not only a physical construct, China's current large-scale developments are most often physical urban redevelopment and new urban expansions. They are the prerequisites for other aspects of urbanisation, such as strengthening urban functions, transforming economic structures, social development, changing lifestyles

and so on. Hence, physical city building has been the main focus of China's urbanisation in the last 30 years and will last for a while longer. In other words, city building will continue to accumulate much attention in terms of city governing strategy, investment and real estate development.

The distinct characteristic of China's urbanisation process is that it is hyper-fast and mega-scaled and government led as a vital means to invigorate the country's economy. Due to the unique scale and rate of urbanisation, and given the administration mechanism left from the socialist planned economy that is still largely in effect till this day, various administrative systems and policies are still in the midst of a dynamic shift. There then arise difficult questions for both people from within the system and outside of it – under what circumstances have the cities been built and what should the attitude be towards decision-making and problem-solving. The difficulty lies in clearly defining and describing the situation. There is a societal development gap between China and developed countries, and differences in the social system make it impossible to understand or explain China's issues using Western development experience and principles. A reasonable understanding of China's urbanisation situation would be the key to decision-making, whether for market forces or for policymaking circles.

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## 1.2 A Transitional Period: Tremendous Change Within a Limited Window of Time

2008s Beijing Olympics and 2010s Shanghai World EXPO were milestones marking 30-year development for China. They also marked China's urbanisation process entering its second half. In the past three decades, large-scale urbanisation caused a proliferation of urban territory and population. This was not simply a growth in quantity but also a structural change as new cities were constructed, but the main growth was still in tangible terms. Right now, cities in China all face enormous pressure to transform or change their model of development. The more well-developed regions already have a newly formed overall framework as most of the critical infrastructure has been set up, while many cities have nearly exhausted their land resources for city expansion. Hence, the urbanisation model that has been in use for the past 30 years, of large-scale physical construction that is at the cost of land resources and environment, can no longer be continued. Furthermore, in terms of urban function, the cities' public services, operational efficiency and quality of urban life are still lagging far behind cities in developed countries. This has driven China to shift the focus of urban development from tangible construction to upgrading urban structure at other aspects, addressing issues like the cities' functioning with efficient operations and better quality of life. This could be done through revising plans for urban areas that are not yet fully built or introducing small-scale adjustments to completed ones.

The Chinese urbanisation process will probably experience another 15–20 years of vigorous development, but it must be recognised that this window of time will not be long. The fast and large-scale city development model that accustomed to the cities and the socialist planned economy's residual administration mechanism are the largest challenges that China faces in its bid for transformation. The future of Chinese cities hangs on whether or not China succeeds in this transformation within this window.

---

## 1.3 Medium-Scale Urban Issues

Many of the issues surrounding China's urbanisation have attracted criticism of various experts in their fields, including sociology, economics, political science, cultural studies, environmental science, the arts, mass media and even medical science. While those critical voices are mostly good and worth considering, they tend to mix the issues coming from different fields of study and take on the issues arising from different urban scales at the same time. As rarely bridging idea to policymaking, urban administration or market implementation forces, they become theoretical research isolated from reality, hardly be able to affect changes in real-world situations. A specific bridge channelling constructive criticism and suggestions into a particular urban scale to address clearly identified actual issues is badly needed. So the voices can correspond with certain aspects of the current policies and management structures in play. This is just as important as the discourse on what makes a good city, if not more so.

China's current urban planning system in terms of a city governing tool includes the macro-scale, medium-scale and micro-scale levels. These three levels are inseparable, yet they are also distinct, each with their own core challenges corresponding to the government departments, market forces and implementation mechanisms. The macro-scale and micro-scale are familiar to most. The former is, simply put, the city's master planning, defining the city's scale, positioning, socioeconomic development goals, overall resource allocation, transport infrastructure, urban–rural pattern, environmental protection and other broad issues using policies and the construction of infrastructure to lay the city's overarching structural framework. The latter is concerned with individual building project, be it a private development or public investment project. The professional planning and design and the planning department's approval process also belong to it. Between the two scales, there is a level of control planning – it is the interface between city governance and the land development

market, having a whole set of legal documents directly addressing the actual land use administration and lease of land. Shanghai, for example, has control planning documents that usually take a 2 km<sup>2</sup> urban area as a control unit. This can also be interpreted as the territory of an urban unit, a community. Today many of the issues surrounding Chinese cities come from this urban scale, and it is also what this book refers to as the medium scale.

The medium-scale problems are commonplace in China's urbanisation, whether in an urban redevelopment area or a brand new city part. They are not the large-scale or mega-scale developments, but new urban areas built within a short time under the city government's push, according to the control planning documents indicators and requirements, jointly developed by public and private sectors. This is the unique situation birthed from rapid large-scale urbanisation, rarely seen in today's developed countries. Of course, this kind of urban area will also be the foundation upon which future communities are built.

As mentioned earlier, the overall framework of many of China's big cities has already been defined through the laying out of basic infrastructure, but the medium scale still needs to be 'filled in', so all these urban areas still have much room for improvement. The key question is how to make these districts good structures upon which communities can grow, being at once made up of tangible urban structures, functioning operational structures and social structures. This is not just about planning figures and control indicators such as capacity, traffic organisation or green coverage. If the medium-scale structural issues can be reasonably resolved, together with a package of planning guidelines, a decent urban backdrop would be provided for individual development projects. Current criticism about China's built environment is mostly concentrated in the medium scale. Architects are often seen trying to solve societal level issues when they are designing projects in China; however, they are limited in their impact as the medium-scale level planning issues are not resolved.

A new urban area's operational efficiency is directly related to the city's economy, especially the economic development after the area is

urbanised, so this is the consideration that moves the decision-makers most. The economy in turn is closely related to the urban spatial quality, urban functions, traffic organisation, environment and other structural factors of urban planning and design. This is clearly demonstrated in the comparison between Shanghai's Lujiazui Central Business District and New York's Lower Manhattan found in this book. These medium-scale structural issues will also directly affect the lifestyles of those who will come to live and work in these urban areas. These are also undoubtedly the factors that investors and developers consider closely. Thus, against the backdrop of China's urbanisation, this is the most crucial scale to change, and it also possesses much room for improvement. Yet compared to the macro- and micro-scales, this medium scale garners too little attention. As an urban district or community typically covers 2–5 km<sup>2</sup> and is usually completely new or redeveloped urban territory, a bottom-up model depending on the participation of the community cannot be applied to solve the issues – it necessitates the top-down approach that requires the authorities' planning and governance to make decisions. This is the challenge that all rapidly urbanising cities will have to face.

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## 1.4 Structure of the Book

The book with nine chapters is divided into three parts, revealing the three stages needed in turn to understand Shanghai urbanism at the medium scale.

### 1.4.1 Part I: Understanding Shanghai Urbanism

Part I is about understanding the urbanism through historical review of Shanghai city evolution process and also through the observation on current various urbanisation situations in full Shanghai territory. It includes two interconnected chapters.

Chapter 2 provides a full picture of Shanghai city evolution in four stages. Normally Shanghai's

city development was seen as a three-stage evolutionary line. This study considers Shanghai entered the fourth era of transformational development after the year 2000 with uncertain answers on which urbanism should be applied to large amount areas in the near future that the city has to infill – the urbanising areas.

Chapter 3 observes the different urbanisation situations along the city building history to date through 18 concisely organised case studies, with the intention to analysing the past and current, foreseeing the potential solutions for ongoing and future urbanising areas. Each period of Shanghai's urban development has its own urban fabric and character that are distinctly shaped by the historical factors of their time, and they each present a few different situations clearly resulting from certain rules. The 18 case studies are representative of the four stages of urbanism and can be seen as a method developed by the study for understanding an urban situation at about 1 km<sup>2</sup> scale, a typical size of an urban community. This method could be helpful for professionals, developers and city officials when they deal with many real-world issues occurring at such scale in Chinese cities.

### 1.4.2 Part II: Exploring Alternative Solutions for Urban Regeneration and New City Making

It can be seen from the observational studies about Shanghai's urbanisation situations in Part I that Shanghai's urbanisation process currently is focused on two areas: the regeneration of old parts of the city and the creation of new cities, both in large scales. These are also the two main ways in which other Chinese cities are urbanising, and they still have an uncertain future. Focusing on these two areas, Part II with three chapters is an exploratory design study looking at three such cases in Shanghai which are at their initial stages of development, having an uncertain future and some room for change. Their specific background and context are explained to better understand the issues surrounding them. Then a

general strategy is developed in response to the key challenge, and different ways to translate this general strategy into a physical plan at the medium scale are explored through alternative solutions which seek reasonably elementary schemes rather than highly creative, avant-garde approaches.

Shanghai EXPO's Puxi site and Xuhui District's waterfront area are both parts of Shanghai's 40-km-long Huangpu Waterfront Urban Regeneration plan that was proposed in the early twenty-first century to redevelop the city in the long term. Lingang is one of the more unusual satellite cities among the nine that are planned for Shanghai, as it relies on the new airport and harbour that both rank among the world's largest, and it was built on agricultural and reclaimed land, revealing the difficulties in creating a new city in a short time span under such atypical circumstances.

### 1.4.3 Part III: Reflecting on Future Chinese Urbanity

The Chinese urban situation can be somewhat overwhelming and confusing, and it is difficult to understand the reasons why things are done the way they are today. To understand these urbanisation conditions, reasons behind scenes and other deep-rooted driving factors intertwined with various sectors in the society, academic explanations from planning and design perspective are barely enough to cover all these issues, and neither can provide effective solutions for the change. In-depth observation and clear understanding is the key approach to shape the future. This part is set for further understanding by gathering views and thoughts from a broader spectrum, from different perspectives.

Chapter 7 demonstrates understanding of Chinese cities from foreign students' perspective, through step by step analysis, beginning with descriptions of physical phenomena, to the discussion of the factors that might have contributed and finally digging deeper for explanations. This thought process provides an insight for further inspirations or debates as one way to understand Chinese cities today.

By interviewing some key figures in Shanghai from political decision-makers, city administrators and developers, Chap. 8 is seeking those ‘external’ voices and their opinions on what the challenges of implementing concepts and designs are, which may differ somewhat from

what architects and planners have in mind. Hopefully, reflecting on this broader perspective will aid in understanding the unique contribution of each profession involved in the urbanisation process and lead to more effective collaboration between the different parties.

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**Part I**

**Understanding Shanghai Urbanism**

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# Evolution of Urban Planning and City Development of Shanghai: The Past Three Eras and the Present

# 2

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## 2.1 Shanghai's Past Three Eras of Urbanisation

Shanghai is strategically positioned at the T-shaped junction of two major economic belts in China: the Eastern coast and the Yangtze River Valley. This advantageous location spurred the formation and growth of Shanghai, which quickly developed into a major financial centre within a century after the early 1840s when it was a small town. To date, Shanghai has already experienced three eras of urbanisation, each stage exhibiting distinct characteristics in terms of population, industry, role in national and regional financial systems, urban expansion and so on. These complex and rich historical processes have left their mark on the city; each one morphing and transforming the urban fabric of Shanghai.

### 2.1.1 Shanghai in Modern Times: From a Small Town to a Metropolis 1843–1949

Shanghai's first era of urbanisation in modern times began in the 1840s with the forced establishment of the British Settlement and the French Concession in the area. By the 1920s–1930s (the so-called Golden Era of modern Shanghai), the city developed into the financial centre of the Far East.

When Shanghai opened up for development in 1843, the small town's territory was mainly made

up of the area enclosed by its city walls and the wharf area along the Huangpu River. The town existing at that time is today's Lao-Cheng-Xiang or the traditional town, nearly 2 km<sup>2</sup> in size (Fig. 2.1). The first foreign settlements were planned north of this town along the river, with the intention to separate foreign settlements from Chinese areas. This separation formed the twin town structure of Shanghai half a century later (Figs. 2.2 and 2.3). When wars struck the areas around Shanghai,<sup>1</sup> an increasing number of Chinese fled to the foreign areas for protection and then settled there. The foreign settlement and concession continued to expand. Over time, modern Shanghai's development was based around the foreign settlement and concession; these areas eventually constitute the major part of the core of Shanghai city until today (Fig. 2.4).

Modern Shanghai's urbanisation process took place around the same time as major large cities in developed countries of the West. At the time, Shanghai's population, industry, scale of the city's economy and urban area were generally balanced and comparable to the then Western cities. Similarly, the problems faced by Western capitalist cities, such as slums, were also found in Shanghai. However, while the industrialisation of the West was stimulated by internal forces, Shanghai's first era of urbanisation took place

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<sup>1</sup>There were many wars around Shanghai region in the 1850s and 1860s caused by rebellions such as Small Sword Society Rebellion (1853–1855) and Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864).