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Illuminating Shanghai: Light, Heritage, Power¹

Abstract: This paper explores the complex connection between heritage, light and power in Shanghai since the late 19th Century, and seeks a new understanding of how mutually coupled legacies of modernity, socialism and cosmopolitanism continue to shape this city's unique identity and image. It focuses on the recent ideological remake of the skyline along the Huangpu River, achieved largely through the flamboyant illumination designed in 2018. Combining a number of visual and textual sources with fieldwork, it reveals the persistent symbolic role the city has played in a triumphant socialist cause, and assesses how past promises of a new Shanghai and a bright future for China have been sustained in the Reform Era. It forms a preliminary attempt to depict what the author argues should be perceived and studied as the engineering of a new propaganda medium which intersects with urban space governance. The implications of this project are discussed in the context of the threats and opportunities for Shanghai in terms of maintaining the city's unique character and meaning coming from its own history and culture, rather than in terms of Shanghai simply being a vehicle for China's modernity.

Keywords: *urban lighting, propaganda, Shanghai, modernity, light*

Introduction

Lighting has become central for developing Chinese cities, because it is expected to play an active role in transforming their image, displaying regional culture, improving citizens' lives

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and accelerating the night economy. Multiple developments and shifts in leisure consumption and city branding, closely linked to the rapid growth in both domestic and international business and tourism in the recent years, have resulted in excessive lighting of Chinese cityscapes (both built and natural components) and surrounding sceneries (such as hills or rivers) and become a growing trend, noticeable in big and small cities. When seen from a high-speed train on a sleepless night, even minor Chinese cities often appear from the darkness as glowing fairylands – bubbles of modernity with lit-up bridges, compounds, and streets. These lit-up skylines vary in their history and employed technology. They can be static or dynamic, directed by the municipal authorities or individual developers, fully synchronized or disordered, purely commercial or festive (marking important events or holidays), permanent or temporary. What they all have in common is that as an urban phenomenon they constitute a significant component of contemporary Chinese visual and political culture.

This paper forms an attempt to analyze this emerging form of cultural creativity within a particular political and urban context. It focuses on Shanghai, celebrated since China's first gas lamps, electric lights and neon signs were introduced to this city. Although Shanghai has recently redesigned massively its street lighting, decorative and architectural lighting in different parts of the city, as well as lighting for sports facilities, and introduced various forms of festive lighting, I focus solely on the massive light display along the Huangpu River. The buildings it illuminates are arguably one of the world's best-recognized and most distinct skylines, often presented as one of Shanghai's greatest attractions. Both historically the oldest in China and nowadays trend-setting, Shanghai's nocturnal lightscapes have served over the years different functions and can be evaluated in different ways. They have been despised as foreign pollution or an indicator of conspicuous consumption, praised as a splendid marker of China's aspirations for modernity and globality, considered a strategy of urban development, and used to boost national pride and confidence. Careful analysis of the latest reconfiguration of Shanghai's nocturnal skyline over the past three years can provide valuable insights about ongoing shifts in the perception of the ideals of modernity and governance in China.

The scholarly work of such researchers as Sandy Isenstadt and Tim Edensor attests to the rapid growth of interest in different forms of light and illumination in the city, as well as various cultural, social and political aspects of urban lighting, and the interactions it can trigger. Sandy Isenstadt remarked that the introduction of electric lighting resulted in the formation of new "luminous spaces" and a new set of visual conditions in the city, which have been subject to negotiation ever since. He proposed to approach light in the city as a form of architecture and an instrument of spatial invention (Isenstadt, 2018, chap. 1). Tim Edensor brought attention to the significant issue how light and dark are continuously saturated with cultural values and understandings, as well as how light and darkness can be deployed to shape space and place and impact a human body. Moreover, and perhaps even more importantly in the context of the study I propose, he devoted a whole chapter to the

multiple ways in which power is expressed and mobilized in or through lighting (Edensor, 2017, chap. 4). However, my approach significantly differs in the way that I am mostly interested in how the new image of the builtscape along Huangpu River, achieved through the new illumination and short videos accompanying it, fits into continuing efforts to redefine Shanghai's identity and status. I explore what the recent makeover can reveal about the city's continuing importance for China's modernization, as well as for the symbolical expression of China's transformation and its dreams for the future. In other words, my focus is more on the ongoing negotiation of the dominant Chinese narrative of urban identity and the political fate of Shanghai, than on the lighting itself. Therefore, I do not aspire to propose a comprehensive analysis of the successive forms of illumination, involving distinctive aesthetics, technologies, environmental costs, policies or legislation determining their advancement and curatorship. Particular lighting schemes are of interest to me insofar as they illustrate or reinforce certain discourses, or aim to adjust them in accordance with the spirit of a particular era. If I explore various uses and symbolic connotations of Shanghai's skyline throughout the decades, I do so in order to understand how they have been dismissed or recreated in the current incarnation of the Huangpu skyline.

Building a visual database documenting and investigating how connotations of the Bund have fluctuated across a wide spectrum after 1949, is a much broader research project and an ongoing endeavor, which I pursue in the hope that it can help inform my reading of the contemporary design of Shanghai's skyline and illumination, and in particular understand which threads proved consistent, which became twisted and which remain concealed. This paper serves as a preliminary account of the first findings and insights. In my examination I rely also on small scrapbooks, which I made when I first lived in Shanghai in the mid-nineties, and which over the years have become a fascinating record of Shanghai's urban space prior to major redevelopments and the rebranding of the city. Since 2012, I have been documenting the evolution of Shanghai's skyline and its illuminations in a more systematic way through photography, autoethnography, participant observation, empirical explorations, and interviews. I have collected press articles and documented responses appearing in Chinese social media (WeChat Moments). My understanding of this topic has been significantly enriched through exchanges with Chinese and foreign participants attending the LUCI Annual General Meeting 2019 hosted in Shanghai. While there are obvious limitations in terms of the amount of research material gathered so far, I hope that nevertheless this study can establish a fair foundation for further investigation, and incite more research exploring Shanghai's legacy and fate in a perspective approaching modern Shanghai history as an organic entity, which cannot be easily segmented or it will inevitably result in blatant distortions.

Due to the limited scope of this study, I leave aside the significant commercial component of Shanghai's skyline, which is suppressed in the new festive illumination. Even if this suppression can be meaningful in itself, I choose to highlight the convergence of the builtscape and illumination that broadcasts a certain vision of China and its accomplished

modernity in the New Era. I aim at an account of contemporary modern urban space and its role in political communication, recognizing that the Huangpu skyline is a complex illuminated palimpsest, able to provide valuable insight into China's transformation and soft power narratives. What relationship can be seen between Shanghai's problematic past and anticipated socialist future through a careful study of the most recent restructuring of Shanghai's symbolic landscape along the Huangpu? How does this reinvention inform or challenge our understanding of Shanghai's urban legacy and of socialist China itself? What message does the pulsating skyline broadcast to the world? What does it reveal about the impact of China's historical consciousness on the formation of China's national identity, and how does it reflect recent and current challenges in China's political and economic development?

Pioneering Modernity and Socialist Cosmopolitanism

Shanghai has been assigned different, at times mutually exclusive, ideological values since the late 19th century. The enormous significance of illumination along the Huangpu River cannot be fully grasped without taking into consideration the fact that China's modernity, rapidly emerging in Shanghai, was already first put on display during the late Qing (1644-1912), and presented both as a dream and a national accomplishment. Unsurprisingly, already back in that time, it was framed in close relation to the four major categories of technology – sound, light, chemistry, and electricity (Lee, 1999, p. 49). Light is still now associated with progress, cleanliness, and efficiency. Ever since contemporary Shanghai reestablished itself as the *modu* 魔都 of China – a magical city, a fascinating metropolis – it has to some extent desired to evoke the legacy of Republican Era (1912-1949) and its mesmerizing nightscapes, captured for instance in Zhou Xuan's songs (most notably *Ye Shanghai* 夜上海, *Night-time Shanghai*), early films, such as *Dushi Fengguang* 都市风光 (*Scenes of City Life* or *Cityscape*, dir. Yuan Muzhi 袁牧之, 1935), depicting dazzling interior and exterior lighting amidst modern architecture and vibrant urban life, and literary works by such authors as Mu Shiyong 穆时英 and Mao Dun 茅盾. One passage in Mao Dun's *Midnight*, depicting late twilight over the Huangpu River (Mao, 1957, p. 9), became so iconic that it is inevitably brought up by scholars writing about different aspects of modernism and modernity in Shanghai (Lee, 1999, pp. 3–5; Mitter, 2008, p. 178; Lin, 2015, p. 116) and in fact the title of this paper is an intended pun.

As a result of profound changes brought by modernity and associated artistic imagery generated over the years, the urban lightscape of Shanghai early on became closely associated with freedom, individualism and allure. This aura was further reinforced during the Reform and Opening Up Era (1978-2018), when nocturnal lightscapes, in addition to manifesting China's economic miracle, also implied the growth of nightlife and the space for the liberalization or individualization of Chinese society in terms of morality and gender norms. In a broader sense, Huangpu illumination was meant to

reflect the ongoing spirit of political opening and economic experimentation, as shown in development in recent decades. In 1988, Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 launched a large-scale nighttime lighting design project on the Huangpu. With the establishment of the Night Lighting Management and Construction agency, its objective was to accentuate Shanghai's status as China's most cosmopolitan city and mark Shanghai's cultural and economic successes for the global audience (Lin, 2015). Since 1989, Shanghai has explored scaled landscape lighting. In the 1990s, the "Let the Shanghai Light Up!" slogan reinforced a desired connection between urban lighting and the city's world status, cosmopolitan aura and foreign investment (Lu, 1998, as cited in Lin, 2015, p. 115). In the early 2000s, lighting was installed in the Pearl Tower during its renovation, and the LED screen of Aurora Building (which in October of 2004 won the Guinness World Record for the largest screen in the world), promised an irresistible and unforgettable adventure: „Seven Wonders of the World, seven days in Shanghai". In 2009 Shanghai implemented a lighting strategy entitled "Blue Print", covering three areas in the city center: the most central part including People's Square and its surrounding area, Nanjing Road Commercial Street and the Huangpu River area, and the Ring Road with the secondary city center – including Wujiaochang, Xujiahui, Huamu and Zhenru districts ("Shanghai (China)", n.d.). Since 2017, Shanghai has continuously experimented with lighting, aiming at a fully controlled and harmonized riverside lightscape. Event lighting has been displayed on several occasions: National Day, Spring Festival, the Lantern Day Festival, and New Year's Eve. A number of themed illuminations, such as *Rising Asia* or *Peace and Dream*, have also been presented to the world on different occasions, and the 2010 Shanghai EXPO was accompanied by its own lighting project. The most noteworthy of recent light projects was developed along Huangpu River for the 2018 China International Import Expo (CIIE), which I discuss in more detail further in the text.

It is not difficult to be deceived that the evolution of Shanghai's urban landscape has evolved in a unidirectional manner toward more light or more confident cosmopolitanism, with the exception of the Revolutionary Era (1949-1978). The first decades following the proclamation of the People's Republic of China may easily appear as an aberration to this steady progression, an era in Shanghai's history when there was no space for festive lights and flashy façades. Indeed, neon lights reminiscent of the semicolonial era and capitalism were targeted and dismantled or even destroyed between 1966-1976 (Lin, 2015, p. 116). In the memories of many people I interviewed in the course of my research, revolutionary Shanghai appears as a rather bleak and gloomy city, and even more unpleasantly if they remembered or learned from their parents of the thrilling urban landscapes of the prewar metropolis. However, several interviewees also had vague recollections of festive lighting in the city marking special occasions (K. Pawlik, personal communication, 2018-2019). In fact, accepting an exclusively dark perspective would imply disregarding the great internal complexity of the Revolutionary Era, which was in fact far less consistent than the term used to distinguish it in Chinese history tends to suggest.

First of all, it should be emphasized that while China's engagements with the world significantly changed after 1949, they did not cease to exist, even if broken relations were experienced by certain Western countries. Nikolai Volland (2017) has proposed a useful notion of "socialist cosmopolitanism", which facilitates rejection of an excessively gloomy and parochial image of Shanghai during the decades of revolutionary struggle. In research focused on literary production, Volland discusses exchanges between China and other socialist countries, and arrives at the profound conclusion that socialist cosmopolitanism was not an aberration, but "a modulation and continuation of a longer cosmopolitan trajectory" (Volland, 2017, p. 191). He insists that socialist cosmopolitanism must be seen within the larger cosmopolitan project spanning China's twentieth century containing different forms of encounter and engagement with the foreign (Volland, 2017, pp. 189-190). Such a broadened perspective certainly offers new possibilities for studying contemporary China's endeavors to balance "the national" and "the global" so noticeable in Shanghai, which may result in a new model of socialist cosmopolitanism yet to unfold before our eyes. Though initially proposed by Nikolai Volland within the field of comparative literature, this framework may prove accurate and relevant in many other contexts. I've applied it in my research of visual culture and intend to use it also in this analysis of Shanghai's symbolic imagery and city's engagements with cosmopolitanism and socialism.

The enormous complexity of the Revolutionary Era (1949-1978) in Shanghai typically results in mental shortcuts involving a series of radically simplifying and often even somewhat judgmental juxtapositions with the Republican Era (1912-1949), both in research and personal storytelling. It is often suggested that Shanghai after 1949 was dead, depressed, forgotten, and insignificant. Partly such binary approaches were enforced by the post-1949 leadership, which tended to constantly cut themselves off from the past, and whose rhetoric suggested rapid sweeping changes (Wasserstrom, 2008, p. 77). Moreover, at some point Shanghai was unquestionably condemned as the evil city owned by foreigners and the Guomindang, who cooperated with the imperialists to exploit the Chinese people, and remained a reactionary stronghold even after the Liberation (Bergère, 2009, p. 342; Braester, 2005). The spirit of entrepreneurship and active cosmopolitanism (implying a broader and much more pluralistic understanding of the world before 1949) was suppressed. The Era of the Reform and Opening-up, with its own attempts and rhetorical strategies to disconnect from the recent past and revive the glories of the Republican Era in Shanghai, complicated conceptual frameworks and understandings of Shanghai's historic legacy to an even further extent. Only recently have sentiments of "Shanghai nostalgia" become tamed, allowing reconsiderations of the prewar legacy in a different lens and through the legacy of the socialist era (Zhang, 2002, pp. 148-149). Shanghai certainly lost much of its glamour and confidence during the Revolutionary Era, but on the other hand it is also unquestionable that the city has been a special site for the Chinese Communist Party as the country's most populous city, its major socialist industrial base and historical center of working-class movements, the site of the Communist Party's First National Congress, and a metropolis where many forms

of exploitation or national humiliation had been particularly extreme before Liberation, but were allegedly defeated through the new spirit of independence and self-reliance.

One of the key advantages of the term “socialist cosmopolitanism” and the broadened perspective it implies is that it allows us to complicate simplistic linear approaches, and perhaps even more importantly, empowers rejection of the conceptual separation of “Shanghai as treaty port”, “Shanghai under communism”, and “a contemporary Shanghai with its socialist market economy”. In fact, whenever Shanghai’s continuous yet multifaceted engagement with socialism throughout most of the twentieth century becomes trivialized, not only the city’s growth, but all of China’s modernity immediately becomes devoid of any logic, continuity, and coherence. Only through thorough examination of various continuities and disidentifications is it possible to fully understand the premises and promises of the “New Era”. Frameworks suggesting that at any point Shanghai was dead and then reborn, imply a counterproductive erasure of big parts of the city’s history and design legacy, which make it a unique place in the world. While it is debatable to what extent Shanghai was one of a kind, there have not been many cities in world history which have been both an epicenter of global modernity and a major socialist city, and certainly none of them maintains a significance comparable to Shanghai today. What makes Shanghai such a relevant subject of study for understanding the transformations of contemporary China is exactly how it endured and was never dead, regardless of how difficult the circumstances or radical the reinventions. Different forces shaped it, different legacies were and will be drawn upon in different times in history, and yet it seems unlikely that this city can ever vanish.

Toward Nonlinear Continuity

Perception of the Bund was of course very ambiguous already during Republican Era, depending on such obvious and primary factors as nationality or social class. It could thrill and engender pride among the privileged (both foreigners and Chinese), or be perceived as a symbol of inequalities, humiliation and exploitation experienced by ordinary Chinese people across the country. Changes after 1949 have further complicated the issue. Depending often on particular cases and in certain time periods, pre-1949 architecture was contested by the regime and devastated by housing overcrowding, or could be gradually “purified” and cleansed of the stains of their semi-colonial or bourgeois origins (Wasserstrom, 2008, p. 107; Braester, 2005). It is worth noting that images of the Bund (as well as some other Republican era architecture structures like for instance Great World or Shanghai Post Office) circulated widely in revolutionary visual culture, especially in widely available print media, such as tickets, notebooks, certificates, printed public transport timetables, pocket calendars, or food packaging.

To some extent this can be explained by the fact that the Bund and other Republican era buildings simply had to continue to function as Shanghai landmarks, because only few additions were made to Shanghai’s builtscape after 1949 (mainly the Sino-Soviet Friendship



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Fig. 1. Shanghai Public Transportation Handbook. Spring 1960. Private collection of the author.
 Fig. 2. Retirement certificate depicting the Bund. Issued in Shanghai in 1983. Private collection of the author.

Building, factories and utilitarian apartment blocks for workers). At the same time, however, this also shows the extent to which negative connotations of the Bund as an emblem of Western power were obliterated, since the Bund appeared surrounded by socialist slogans and important revolutionary symbols or figures. Moreover, through my interviews I collected testimony of how objects depicting Shanghai, or even just having characters “Shanghai” written on them, were assigned particular prestige even when used in other parts of China (K. Pawlik, personal communication, 2017-2019).

What makes this historical context particularly relevant for analysis of the current reconfiguration of the skyline along the Huangpu River is how it reveals that such visual extraction of one part of the urban builtscapes to redefine the city and project certain meanings persisted within socialist revolutionary culture. Yomi Braester observed that as a result of such practices, Shanghai was easily turned into “a place whose spatial parameters are continually deterritorialized to a symbolic level” (Braester, 2005, p. 413). Such extractions are meaningful, because they solidified perception of the Bund (and later Pudong skyline) as an emblematic entity of its own, almost floating in space, disconnected from its immediate context, ready to freely absorb and project any assigned messages and values – even those which might appear contradictory to the style or initial purpose or ownership of those buildings.

There is a group of visuals which require special attention in this paper, since they seem to illustrate a duality which implied after 1949 both rejection or condemnation of the former lightscapes, and appropriation of urban lighting as a medium to establish and celebrate

a new order. For instance, a well-known propaganda poster *Shanghai's Bund on a festive day* by Zhang Yuqing 章育青 (1963) depicts a splendid illumination of the Bund with lit-up buildings, ships and park. An advertisement vignette *Night in Shanghai*, depicted fireworks above the glowing Bund. So does one of the graphic designs commemorating the 22nd anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (included in a design sample book, 1971), depicting part of the Bund, factories, and a giant street lamp, together with flags, banners, spotlights, and fireworks marking this festive occasion. One might assume that these depictions were merely figments of imagination, but a photograph of the Bund lit up with strings of yellow, white and red light appeared on a paper calendar from 1973. In fact, even the revolutionary film *Guards under the Neon Lights* (1963) set in 1949 Shanghai, showcasing People's Liberation Army soldiers resisting Shanghai's lights and other bourgeois allures, seems to suggest that Shanghai's lights were never completely turned off, but rather changed in style and purpose. Not only are the characters displaying the film title meant to appear like a glowing red neon sign, but far more importantly, in the closing scene of the film, the Park Hotel (second most iconic spot after the Bund and the tallest skyscraper in Shanghai at that time) had slogans lit on it. Three rows of red neon characters proclaimed "Long live Chairman Mao", "Long live the Communist Party of China", and "Long live the People's Republic of China", which is an interesting adoption of the very thing identified as symbolizing decadence in the film. Much more consistent and thorough research is required before a firm hypothesis can be made, but it seems reasonable and rewarding to consider the possibility that socialist Shanghai has flirted with lights for a long time.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Fig. 3. Advertisement vignette *Night in Shanghai*. Private collection of the author.

Fig. 4. Graphic design commemorating the 22nd anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (included in a design sample book, 1971).

Fig. 5. Pocket calendar depicting illuminated Bund, 1973. Private collection of the author.

World's Leading Lightscape and Nocturnal Propaganda

Only if we resist a common temptation to perceive Shanghai as a bubble existing aside of China's socialism, and we're able to challenge the misconception that China's aspirations for modernity passed with the advent of People's Republic of China, can we fully grasp the significance of the Huangpu River illumination designed for CIIE. Implemented for the Shanghai Municipality by Signify (formerly Philips Lighting), this dynamic light show was imposed on an already spectacular and photogenic nocturnal skyline, consisting of the Bund, individual illuminations of the Pearl Tower, iconic skyscrapers (Jinmao, Shanghai World Financial Tower and Shanghai Tower) and LED media façades of multiple other surrounding towers, screening dynamic visual and textual content (Greenspan, 2014, p. 56). The new show, meant to synchronize the view of the both riversides, consisted of more than 50,000 connected light points stretching 1.2 km along the waterfront (a massive extension beyond the historical part of the waterfront and beyond Pudong's Lujiazui Financial District). It included three bridges (the Yangpu, Nanpu and Xupu bridges), over 40 buildings in the financial and tourist districts, and the waterfall effect along Huangpu ("Signify shines dynamic light on Shanghai's bridges", 2018). The Interact Landmark system used in this lightshow allowed remote monitoring and control of the lights, creation of dynamic flamboyant night scenes on weekdays, weekends or holidays, easy switching into an energy-saving late-night mode, as well as the efficient detection and management of faults (Signify, 2018). Prior to CIIE in 2018 and 2019, promotional videos were distributed widely online, as well as on the urban screens installed in the subway and in the neighborhoods. Remarkable and enchanting, they included mesmerizing views of the illuminated city, mostly recorded from an aerial perspective (Shih, 2018). Throughout 2019 and 2020 an increasing number of laser lights was added, and the overall illumination became noticeably faster, more dynamic, and much more flickering, almost glaring.

The CIIE is closely tied to China's drive for global leadership, of which the slogan "新时代共享未来 New Era Shared Future" is its most explicit indication.² According to the explanation provided on the official website of the Import Expo, it:

adheres to the principle and spirit of "One Belt, One Road" (...) and demonstrates that the Import Expo will be guided by Xi Jinping's new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics (...). The platform allows the world to share the "new era" of China's development achievements, contribute to the development of an open world economy, and promote

² Another video including daytime and nighttime views of Shanghai, with even more evident narrative making Shanghai a perfect representation of the New Era with its great expectations and supposedly bright perspectives: China International Import Expo. (2019, June 12). *Shanghai Promotional Film: CIIE – New Era, Shared Future* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3MuL7iWofg>. In 2019 video in the end both Magnolia Tower and Shanghai Tower display message "New Era Shared Future" in English and Chinese.

economic globalization in a more open, inclusive, (...) balanced, and win-win direction. (“CIIE theme slogan,” 2018)

Even if views of the rationale and the long-term strategy behind the 2018 CIIE (as well as more generally the Belt and Road Initiative itself) differ greatly among different countries, such is the Chinese interpretation, transposed into and pursued assertively through illuminations for domestic and foreign visitors, as well as for the audiences watching from afar. The importance and strong political dimension of the illumination was made obvious by the fact that the first switch-on of the massive display was witnessed by President Xi Jinping 习近平 and foreign heads of state attending the opening of the CIIE in 2018 – a highly symbolical gesture, adding to the long sequence of what Sandy Isenstadt depicted as political theater celebrating mastery over time and space (through instantaneous action at a distance), and an exceptional ability to bring mesmerizing realms into presence merely by stretching out a finger and pressing a button (“Signify shines dynamic light on Shanghai’s bridges”, 2018; Isenstadt, 2018, p. 37-49).

Shanghai is strongly tied to the outside world, but also to the future of socialist China, which gains new confidence and aspires to become a global leader in economics, culture, technology, and moral values, and this most likely will imply the emergence of a new form of internationalism. Therefore, I argue that we should comprehend Huangpu illumination as a fascinating palimpsest, to reveal layers and tension and to seek to understand how many different components might have become harmonized over time, even if at first they may seem contradictory or even were indeed initially meant as mutual opposites. What seems particularly striking in the illumination developed for the CIIE was the symbolical unification of Puxi, historical center and heart of Shanghai, and Pudong, officially incorporated into Shanghai in 1993 as a new development zone open to international investment and free trade. Built as a sign of the nation’s reemergence, Pudong was supposed to overshadow the semi-colonial legacy of Puxi and match up with Hong Kong’s prestige (Greenspan, 2014, pp. 18, 54-56). Since the 1990s, the two skylines on the eastern and western banks of the Huangpu River have competed for recognition of their part in the story of Shanghai’s soul and China’s destiny, each discarding the other’s “authenticity”. Now they are seen to proudly glow together in synchronized illumination, transcending historical and political divides and moral ambiguities, spreading the message of a strong, internally reconciled city and country. Since the early 2010s, the futuristic skyline of the Lujiazui Financial district has been taken by many as a sign of much that went wrong with China’s new urbanism and economic development, as shown by the difficulties Shanghai Tower faced after its opening, so it’s no wonder that the new illumination strongly reinforces the idea that the intricate skyline along Huangpu river represents the legacy of an unprecedented and successful economic transformation.

Meanings pile up. When one is for instance served glowing pink and blue drinks during a festive event at the VUE Bar overlooking Huangpu’s unique curve, and reflections of the lit-up bar merge into one with Shanghai’s skyline extending to the horizon, it is easy to

experience a *flâneur* kind of intoxication with an urban spectacle of illuminated capitalism, emanating with brilliance and luxury and commodifying the participants. Even walking through the upgraded riverfront, one easily experiences the thrill of an accomplished prosperity, an inexpressible immersion in almost unimaginable urban modernity. Drifting along extended waterfronts people feel as if joining a celebration of an extraordinary achievement, or merging with the momentum and promise of rising China (fieldnotes, 2018-2019). To some extent, this is reminiscent of the ecstasy caused by transcendent, celestial light, connecting an individual to the eternal and infinite. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to discuss recent Shanghai illumination in parallel to such mechanisms dramatizing a spiritual experience or engendering a glimpse of the sacred. Nevertheless, it seems valid to assume that the implemented design solutions must to some extent have been chosen for certain sensory experiences representing a powerful socialist state with a strong ideological agenda. And if it is so, then it seems relevant to inquire whether Shanghai's illuminated skyline should not be perceived as one of the many innovative tech-savvy propaganda tools introduced in China in the recent years to promote patriotism, extol the virtues of the party and cultivate socialist values, such as unconventional short videos or the popular app 学习强国 "Study Xi to Strengthen the Nation" (Sun, 2019; Huang, 2019).

It is hard to disagree that modern lighting has provided new opportunities for and is actively incorporated into propaganda efforts in Shanghai. At night, many walls, LED screens and installations in public squares glow with slogans or display core socialist values lit up in different ways.³ On ordinary days, when the splendid synchronized show along the river is not displayed, projections on many of the glass towers along Huangpu River show content relating to city branding or particular seasons, or to patriotic expressions of love for the motherland or support for Chinese socialism. In fact, other than being intoxicated with views of the floating city at VUE Bar, it is for instance also possible to experience Shanghai at "M on the Bund" as an extraordinary collage of crystal glamour, Chamber Music, chic drinks and the characters 法治 (the rule of law), 公正 (justice) or 自由 (freedom), dancing outside of the window on one of the glossy façades on the other bank of the river. Perhaps one important way to see this illumination is as inventive nocturnal propaganda, which sinks into the gin drinks and concerts, saturates minds, feeds national pride, and reshapes desires. Night in a city becomes tamed and appropriated by the state for purposes other than love, friendship, free exploration, unhindered conversation. It is no more completely free from social constraints and conventions than is the daytime. In addition to being a space of work, leisure, lust, intimacy, and even safety supervised by the state, it becomes a space of political action involving power display, shaping obedience and instilling loyalty. A number of essential messages and beliefs are being delivered and reinforced. Firstly, the "unique and world-leading lighting culture" (Lin Zhiming, 2019) designed for Shanghai is a powerful expression of China's eagerness to become a new hegemon. Socialism with Chinese characteristics appears seductive, full of accomplishment, thriving with opportunities. Shanghai, China's oldest window onto the ongoing modernization of the whole country,

stands for the first part of an accomplished modernity, which is expected to spread over time evenly across the whole country, and as such validates decisions made by the state for other parts of China. The political overtone of this lightscape is also revealed in the context of how in past decades Chinese nightlife has been closely associated with illegal sexual businesses and bribery, but since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China anti-corruption efforts have been high on the political agenda. Bright illuminations can thus be seen as a manifestation of a purified Shanghai. Once the red lantern businesses are completely swept away, this legendary sin city will be finally relit up in a new red, expressing the great socialist cause and the great morality of Chinese people.

Shanghai is as much a symbol as a physical city. It is worth emphasizing how the re-configured skyline continues to represent Shanghai as a great port of boundless energy and modernity, but also includes a strong postcolonial undertone. To some extent, this illumination is just the most recent expression of the same aesthetic exuberance and urban modernity which during the semi-colonial era was expressed through the Bund skyline in oil paintings, postcards and photographs for export. After the Bund, there were skyscrapers of Pudong – partly still an illusion, partly already a reality meant to cause the same thrill. Now the illuminations bring new stimuli, reenacting astonishment and admiration. More importantly, they bring a long-awaited symbolical compensation for the Century of Humiliation.⁴ Though once a treaty port, under the supervision of the Communist Party Shanghai has grown into a major financial and transport hub with the world's busiest container port, and can easily afford to welcome foreign countries, including those which once colonized different parts of China. Photographs and videos of an opalescent Bund now circulate on foreign social media and cause delight. If once colonial tensions in the city were manifested among other things through unequal lighting in Chinese and non-Chinese parts of the city (Lin, 2015, p. 120), today the whole city belongs to China and is all ablaze. The country once invaded by technologically-advanced empires, and then subjected to multiple forced and difficult modernizations, finally sees itself regaining its dignity and rightful position, and in a twist of events and power relations unforeseen by the May Fourth Movement (1919) now aims for technological leadership in 21st century.

Eclipsed Heritage

Noteworthy is the fact that this remake is supposed to shed new light on one of the great founding myths of Shanghai about “East and West” coming together, as China heads toward redefining the meaning of “globalization” and of the desired balance between the “own” and the “foreign” in its own cosmopolitan practice. In fact, many more actors and communities came together to contribute to Shanghai’s growth than the notion of “the West” implies, and the global network of the “New Era” that China anticipates also exceeds far beyond Western countries. Current commitment to globalization with Chinese characteristics will inevitably lead to different models of cosmopolitanism than that developed by Shanghai

under or against semi-colonial conditions. The final question of major importance, which I intend to address in this paper concerns the threats and opportunities that will result from this for Shanghai culture.

The first cover of *Manhua Jie* 漫画界, featuring an illustration *City Lights* by Chen Huiling 陈惠龄 (1936) can serve as a vivid example of the problem I have in mind. A careful reader is confused at first, and then truly satisfied by the intentional hybridity of this picture. While two figures are undoubtedly the Tramp and the millionaire, the neon lights and glowing advertisements depicted in the background leave no doubt that this scene is set in Shanghai. How much of such *haipai* spirit and thoughtful infusion of an embraced global modernity with its own distinct features and urban heritage will be possible in today's Shanghai? The 2019 CIIE video ended with the statement “开放的上海欢迎你”, which reads in English “Open (to the World) Shanghai Welcomes You”. What will this openness imply amidst growing and intentionally nurtured Chinese nationalism? Shanghai's nightscapes and nightlife used to be associated with casual, non-committal, adventurous engagements with other cultures (Farrer, 2018, p. 1126), as opposed to the increasing emphasis today on Chinese characteristics and identity (perceived in increasingly narrow and homogenous terms). How will Shanghai reinvent itself amidst this tension – between its own heritage of cosmopolitanism and the new internationalism favored by the central government?

In a way, Shanghai with its inherently tangled legacies of cosmopolitanism and socialism

seems to be a perfect setting for representing the New China, and yet Shanghai was selected as the site of the CIIE and its astonishing illumination not so much because of the past (indeed, the socialist past of Shanghai is commemorated and celebrated in a rather selective way), but because of Shanghai's potential for engineering the future (Greenspan, 2014). Shanghai as a city neither treasures its past nor studies it thoroughly, but rather continuously competes with the old and appropriates it. Shanghai's past is not supposed to be perceived as a foundation and remembered in its most accurate form, nor allowed to settle into an everlasting meaning. Its role is instead to allow the present to pursue the most powerful future, and in order to unleash such creative force, it needs to fluctuate and retell stories with a twist (Abbas, 2002, p. 38; Boyer, 2002, p. 62). The main value of Shanghai for



Fig. 6. The cover of *Manhua Jie* 漫画界 magazine, 1936. Private collection of the author.

contemporary China is meant to lie not in its factual heritage, unparalleled on the global stage, but in its past, which can be activated in many creative ways as a resource and facilitate communication about China's enduring and distinct modernity, both domestically and abroad (Wasserstrom, 2008, p. 120; Gandelonas, 2002b, p. 22).

The notions that “the upgraded lighting system helps demonstrate Shanghai's cultural heritage in a more vivid way” (He Wei, 2019) or that it is merely presents “a refreshing and unique Shanghai-style night scene to the world” involving “International Style, Chinese Soul, Shanghai Characteristics” (Tao Zhen, 2019) are somewhat misleading. It is truly instructive to browse today through and compare photos from the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, and be reminded how even in the recent past the Bund façades seemed overflowing with light in a truly futuristic way, most appropriate for the City of the Next Century, as Shanghai was commonly referred to. Accompanying inscriptions described Shanghai as enchanting and unforgettable, and rising China as a mighty big place. And yet today this is all at best dimly remembered. Part of this change was certainly caused by changes of technology and LED lighting, which transformed urban lighting practices globally. Part of this, however, has to do with the growing confidence and recognition of today's longest-lasting communist regime.

Shanghai has been entrusted by the government with national responsibility to become an influential Chinese city in the world. While questions may arise of whether the city's integrity or own urban expression is compromised by state interests and the demands of the private sector, it is also important to realize that this situation is not new. For the better part of its metropolitan history, Shanghai was expected to lead the future course of the whole nation and serve as an example of how quickly modernity could be achieved. When introducing the historical-intellectual origins of the city, Xudong Zhang recalls an article called *The New Shanghai*, published in 1904 in the revolutionary newspaper *Jingzhong Ribao* 警钟日报, which identifies the city as the hope for a new Chinese civilization, a place which prefigures a “a dazzlingly splendid new world in the heart of darkness” (Zhang, 2002, p. 145). Moreover, as Jeffrey Wasserstrom aptly remarked, in many ways the city's modernity has always been at least to some extent “defined both by the way it worked as a site for formal displays and by the degree to which it was treated and treated itself as a place that was on display” (Wasserstrom, 2008, p. 111). From such a perspective, then, current attempts to take advantage of Shanghai's distinct urban DNA or spirit in branding the whole country for the global audience appear less unusual. In fact, if Shanghai has always been a stage upon which the search for China's modernity was most prominently enacted, such that once this modernity is accomplished it should have Shanghai characteristics. This assumption underpins the closing captions of the 2019 CIIIE promotional video: “Openness (开放), innovation (创新), and magnanimity/tolerance (包容) have become Shanghai's most distinctive character. This character is a vivid portrayal of China's development and progress in the New Era.” New Huangpu Illumination – unquestionably for the time being the crowning achievement of a long-awaited modernity, functions as a mesmerizing show

presented to domestic and international audiences, as well as a broadcast – through carefully directed recordings, guiding the viewer through the city, and providing views almost impossible to obtain on one’s own. The force and range of its impact calls for more attention and reflection concerning the exact essence or guiding principle of this experience, both live and online.

One last issue to be addressed concerns the distinct heritage and identity of Shanghai. In a way, this is put in the spotlight through the image-sign “I ♥ Shanghai”, displayed in the evening on LED screens of two Pudong skyscrapers, Aurora Plaza and Citigroup Tower. This logo, appearing in a variety of graphic layouts in English, Chinese and partly Shanghainese, is often taken as an indication of Shanghai’s confidence and prominent position in the global milieu, but actually rather points out a major challenge Shanghai has to face in the near future. One of them is common to many cities in the world, where rapidly growing numbers of visitors become a threat to the urban locality. Just as it is difficult to tell if the sentiment in this image-sign is expressed on behalf of visitors or Shanghai inhabitants, it is also often unclear who is the major reference group when urban development decisions are made. More specific to China is the question of how to make sure local heritage can be maintained intact, while also expressing national or cultural pride and relying on local resources to brand China for global audiences. Or, in other words, how to add another layer without imposing significant alterations to the existing nightscape of the city?

The appropriation of the globally recognized New York City tourist logo to mark a Chinese city as a top tourist destination inevitably appears controversial. Why when planning a campaign for such a transcultural city as Shanghai, for towers hosting multinational businesses and designed by the Japanese company Nikken Sekkei Ltd., waste such an opportunity to challenge people’s imaginations and become an inspiration for the world – in a different way than New York did? Does a city with such a rich linguistic milieu, including usage of the oldest existing script in continuous use, not deserve something better than a mere reinterpretation of a campaign designed for another city? In Amsterdam, a similar controversy surrounding more creative appropriation of New York’s logo has spurred a long-lasting debate concerning city’s sense of place and municipal authorities’ failure to connect with the creatives in the city. The hazards involved in imposing any single brand identity on a city sustaining its vitality and cosmopolitanism through the interaction of multiple competing identities and beliefs was brought up as well (Mac an Bhreithiún, 2012, p. 260), together with threats resulting from mass tourism and reducing the city to the backdrop of a marketing story. Eventually in December 2018 the main iconic sign “I Amsterdam” was removed from Museumplein.

Shanghainese people often voice similar concerns about the extent to which the unique urban identity and heritage of their city have been diluted since Shanghai joined the global competition among cities (K. Pawlik, 2018–2019). It is of course understandable, and often becomes a source of pride, that Shanghai is expected to lead modernization and brand China for the world. In fact, as Hanchao Lu noted, since the 1990s Shanghai was in a way “seeking

revenge” for the years when it was left behind, and strived ambitiously to regain its status as an unmistakably world-class city (Lu, 2002, p. 172). However, since this has been achieved, the prevailing hope has been that the next phases of development can be approached a bit differently, allowing Shanghai to reemerge as a city with a mature, appealing, distinctive urban personality. The builtscape along the Huangpu River discreetly tells the fascinating story of the inconspicuous, almost unsettling continuity of this city, of the complexity and complementarity of multiple domestic and foreign forces which shaped Shanghai, which the illuminations unfortunately suppress for the sake of highlighting the greater continuity of China. One pressing anxiety is whether Shanghai culture can in the long term maintain more value than merely as a commodity, and whether enough of the local spirit, individual story, and distinct roots can survive the current modernization. Ackbar Abbas observed that the spectacle of Shanghai produces a delirium of the visible that erases the difference between old and new, and recreates in the city a global space in which cultural and historical issues can be fused, and confused, with political and economic interests (Abbas, 2002, p. 51). Eighteen years later this problem has not lost its significance. How far can one go in staging modernity without compromising one’s own identity? Can the current modernization be pursued with the use of additional cultural resources, which for the time being remain concealed or even unnoticed?

Not all cities are required to stand for the whole nation or country, as Shanghai does, but the core question is actually whether it can represent the whole country and nation in a more exciting way, being more faithful to its own heritage of different historical periods, which eventually paved the way for contemporary China. Since the 19th century Shanghai has been renowned as very different from the traditional walled Chinese city, and considered inviting, out-reaching, seemingly boundless. One of its names, Shanghai Tan 上海滩, recognized it as “a kind of intermediate zone between continent and ocean, linking the inland with the world outside” (Lu, 2002, p. 180). Its spirit of a certain provisionality, heterogeneity, unevenness and self-contradiction resulted in a pattern of modernity and modernization which at its core had a constant experimentation, driven simultaneously by suspicion, critique and passion for the very concept of the modern (Zhang, 2002, p. 143). The future will show how much of this mood can be retrieved, and whether, as Xudong Zhang remarkably suggested back in 2002, the modernity and Chineseness of Shanghai can indeed be understood “as something more modern than the modern and more Chinese than the Chinese”, and whether Shanghai can “find a way to become smaller, meaner, more “down to earth”, less formed, less significative, less territorialized than the images imposed or self-imposed upon it, (...) shaped and reshaped by generations” (Zhang, 2002, p. 164). The coming years will reveal to what extent Huangpu illumination is a decisive political intervention into the urban space, and to what extent it can become an inventive trampoline for reimagining Shanghai and its distinct contribution in the network of global cities.

Concluding Thoughts

In order to grasp China's long path from its persistent search for Enlightenment in the Republican Era to its dazzling contemporary projections of confidence and power, it is crucial to acknowledge the complex, ever-evolving ideological values actively shaping Shanghai's skyline. It is essential to trace its continuity not only to the prewar explosions of extravagant urban light, but also to the various festive lightings and ambitions of the whole socialist period. Many different threads reconnect today before the eyes of a careful and unbiased viewer. Laser lights cutting across the skies today may, and perhaps should, be reminiscent of descriptions of disorienting street lights in Mao Dun's *Midnight*, as much as of those visuals of the Revolutionary Era which capture spotlights above the city. To an attentive observer, the Huangpu skyline reconfigured through the new illumination ultimately provides valuable insights both into the Shanghai's past and into the Chinese regime's self-perception. Unbiased evaluation of this massive undertaking entails awareness that every sense of continuity of a place or national history is always a result of meticulous selections. All nations which went through the turmoil of socialist transformations in the 20th century still wrestle with questions of how much should be commemorated and celebrated, how much should be forgotten or recreated, and what tactics will prove most beneficial for maintaining cultural integrity, national cohesion, political stability and economic growth. Shanghai's illuminated skyline will remain a barometer of political change, and is thus valuable to understanding China. It may turn entirely red and gold, with current technology literally overnight, or it may gradually gain more nuance and intricacy. Time will show whether China has healed from its long and heroic struggles for modernity or certain tensions remain. What can be seen now beyond any doubt is a fascinating foundation, but also still a crossroads.

If Shanghai's nocturnal illumination is indeed much more than just an improved urban lighting project, then it requires further research and thorough, multidimensional analyses, which exceed the scope of this preliminary study. It certainly deserves being examined not only in sequence with earlier illuminations, but also in parallel with such major undertakings, involving much lighting design, as the nighttime multimedia show for the G20 Summit in Hangzhou (2016) *Hangzhou is Most Memorable* under direction of Zhang Yimou 张艺谋, the highly immersive large-scale live spectacle *Mao Zedong, China* performed regularly in Shaoshan, Shenzhen's performance during the 2019 Spring Gala (which in addition to dazzling lights featured also textile flexible display in costumes, AR technology and dancing large humanoid service robots) or light displays organized by multiple cities in China in 2019 and 2020 to commemorate anniversary of the PRC on October 1st. At another stage of research it would be also interesting to reconstruct a broader landscape of interconnections between lighting design and the propaganda of various socialist states and governments, at different scales, from politically loaded neon lighting introduced in the streets of many cities in the former socialist bloc in Eastern-Central Europe (Karwińska, 2017), to revolutionary era Chinese lamp shades covered with slogans and illustrations of ongoing electrification

and industrialization. It would also be important to determine the potential of lighting as a tool for shifting political narratives or remaking the city and overcoming its disconcerting legacy (for instance of colonial subjugation) without resorting to major reconstructions of the urban tissue, such as demolitions or invasive restoration projects. A study of its own could be devoted merely to the issue of the ultimate efficacy of this propaganda effort, especially in comparison to other media (for instance easily ignored screens on the metro), taking into consideration differences in responses between visitors and Shanghainese. Another major issue worthy of further examination would be the visual content and individual contributions of each illuminated tower participating in the light display. Due to formal constraints, this paper has focused only on the overall experience of the illumination, without any attempts to analyze whether the graphic design content put on display matches the technologically-advanced appearance of the infrastructure and fits with the general message projected by the joint skylines. Even if none of these complex issues can be addressed in this paper, they all indicate the cultural and political significance of Shanghai's illumination and the relevance of this case study for developing research on urban lighting, branding and governance.

This paper highlighted the complex connection between heritage, light and power in Shanghai, and searched for a new understanding of how mutually coupled legacies of modernity, socialism and cosmopolitanism, continue to shape this city's unique identity and image. It revealed the persistent symbolic role the city has played in the triumphant socialist cause, and assessed how past promises of a new Shanghai and a bright future for China have been sustained in the Reform Era. It formed a preliminary attempt to depict what I argue should be perceived as the engineering of a new propaganda medium, which intersects with urban space governance, relying on advanced technologies and dazzling the audiences. While an increasing number of countries and experts engage in discussion of limiting use of urban light, and designing a more sustainable, aesthetically pleasing and subtly illuminated urban future, China takes a very different path and chooses to use excessive, innovative lighting to communicate about national strength and progress. Shanghai, sometimes labeled as the capital city of the future, will have to find a way to get out from under the weight of the image imposed upon it, in order to maintain the character and meaning that comes from itself and its history and culture, rather than simply being a vehicle for China's modernity. Meanwhile, even in the darkest times it continues to enchant and deliver the promise of a brighter future. Pictures of its festive luminous skyline tend to be incorporated into personal narratives on social media, and at times can even function almost like a spell. Such was for instance the case of a moving post shared by a female migrant worker on her WeChat moments on June 30th, 2020. She posted an older picture of fireworks exploding above the Pearl Tower lit up in red, and accompanied it by the ardent wish "May all our regrets in the first half of the year turn into surprises in the second half of the year. May we meet all the good things in July and rejoice in our hearts. May our sweat be rewarded, efforts do not end with disappointment, and time be kind to you and me. May all efforts lead to good results, all the good things come at the appointed time, all the bad things drift away with the wind. Goodbye June, hello July."

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