

Restructuring a Global Identity: Branding Shanghai by “De-politicization” and “Windowism”

Cities are centers of innovation, economic growth, social mobility, and provide economies of scale in the provision of infrastructure and social services; however, cities also have a long history of differentiating themselves from each other and seeking their individualities to achieve their various social, cultural, economic, political and ideological objectives.

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For centuries, cities have been consciously shaped to form specific place identities for specific audiences. Gold & Ward (1994) called this “City Boosterism” which came from the competition of urban development in the 19th century as a response to the growing nationalization and globalization of market. According to this concept, a city needs to employ appropriate strategies to promote its identity which heavily depends on the unique and distinctive characteristics defined and shaped by the city. Such boosterism typically relies on not only strategies like architectural iconism and monumentalism, and the construction of urban flagship megaprojects, but also efforts to create a vibrant city for living, working and playing, like hosting hallmark events and promoting arts and cultural activities.

Since the industrial revolution, the creation and development of great cities in the world have rest on the integration of economic and cultural activities around the production and consumption of arts, architecture, fashion and design, media, food, and entertainment through the “croissant and opera” strategy, an upgraded version of “bread and circus” intended for a more affluent and cosmopolitan clientele (Yeoh, 2005). The promotion of positive city image requires a strong model of governance in the city where the city administration’s primary task is to ensure the city as the hub of flexible production and consumption and to foster interurban competition for potential investors, regional/national/international talents, and cosmopolitan elites. Jessop (1998) created a notion of “entrepreneurial city” – a city that pursued branding strategies in a self-promotion discourse or fashion through promoting positive images. The combination

of the three key elements – branding strategy, discourse/fashion, and image, made a city to be self-organized into a meaningful entity to engage in place-based promotion. This definition clearly distinguishes cities that initiatively seek self-promotion and pursue branding advantages as meaningful entities from those as conventional cities where urban activities occur without clear strategies, appropriate format and positive images for promotion (Wu, 2007). Jessop & Sum (2000) provided a set of elements that were essential in branding city images. First, a city needs to generate new types of urban spaces, such as high-tech parks, event centers, and public facilities. Second, a city should develop new methods of urban space production. Thirdly, a city needs to enhance the quality of life, spectacles, and new cityscapes in order to create new market for consumption. Fourthly, a city should identify new source of fund to sustain continued growth. Finally, a city should redefine its new position in the hierarchy of the region, nation and global.

One key issue of city branding is the creation of the city's identity which is developed from various contextual variables such as history, demography, politics, economy, and culture. Normally, the identity of a city is perceived in the form of identifiable images based on the city's complex characteristics of spatial configuration and social-cultural values (Zhang & Zhao, 2009). However, the development of city's identity is not an easy task. A city is a place where people with different interests lives and multiple contested ideological values exist. Thus, the city's identity and core values cannot be simply seen as neutral statements of fact, but must appear as claims, justifications and accusations exchanged with a variety of interests. Another key issue of city branding is the perception of the city. In order to make its identity outstanding, the city should create unique values and develop distinctive features, both of which can be developed from the city administration's intention and policy and people's experience within the city.

Over the recent decades, the rapid and dynamic development of globalization and the soaring economic wealth have brought great opportunities for dozens of cities in Asia to develop branding strategies, enhance the discourses of their self-promotion, and improve their urban images. The fast and massive growing of Asian cities as well as their physical and functional urban transformations results from the vibrant growth of economy in this region. Among them, the emergence of Shanghai as a new global hub demonstrates a strong significance in implying the changing political landscape of the global. Global companies have invested millions of dollars there in technologies, banking, tourism, real estate, service and trading. As one of the largest construction sites in the world, Shanghai has expanded its urban form both horizontally and vertically. Many scholars examined the patterns of Shanghai re-development and discussed the branding strategies and images of Shanghai under the impact of globalization. However, few studies have been done on the issue of historical and geographic contexts of Shanghai's branding discourse. In order to understand the self-organized branding/promotion process of a city, it is necessary to understand the contexts in which a regime of accumulation is formulated. This paper aims to contextualize the emergence of Shanghai's identity through the city's different historical roles from semi-colonial, socialistic capital of industrialization, to the post-socialist era of global engagement, and to analyze the characteristic of Shanghai's self-branding spatial discourse. By doing so, this paper explains the political and social intentions

of Shanghai's self-branding and connects the intention and policies of the government to the perception of people about Shanghai.

The evolution of branding strategy, branding discourse and branding images of Shanghai are actually defined by the different roles that Shanghai has played in China's national development in the past 150 years. Those roles have been strongly embedded in the national policies and local aspirations. Over decades, Shanghai is seen the prominent city in China that connects the nation to the world and the primary locomotive of China's domestic economic growth. In this paper, the discussion focuses on the roles that Shanghai played in three different periods: semi-colonial from the 1840s to 1949, the socialistic industrialization from 1949 to 1976, and post-socialistic era from 1976 to present.

SEMI-COLONIAL SHANGHAI

Comparing to other major cities in China, Shanghai has a short history. It was still a small fishing village until the 1840s when the British government forced the Chinese Imperial Court to open several places along the Yangtze River to the West. As a treaty port for foreign settlement, from the 1850s to the beginning of the 1900s, Shanghai underwent a quick urban transformation which was mainly driven by the arrival of Western capitals, technologies and ideas of modern cities. The inflow of Western building forms and lifestyles made Shanghai a sharp contrast with other Chinese cities. Due to its location in the Yangtze River delta and its easy geographical accessibility from the East China Sea and surrounding areas, Shanghai began to see unprecedented prosperity in the first half of the 20th century and became the largest urban hub in China. For example, over 90% of China's banks and more than 50% of international trade were concentrated in Shanghai (Gu & Chen, 1999).

In fact, the change of Shanghai role from an indigenous rural town to a treaty city for foreign settlement triggered the first version of Shanghai's identity development. As a treaty city, Shanghai opened a window for foreigners to explore the vast inland China and also offered a channel from which Chinese could reach out the foreign technologies, ideologies and capitals. In short, Shanghai played the role as a "window" through which foreigners and Chinese interacted with each other. Initially, the role of window was designated by the central government as a national policy responding to the Western invasion. However, with the advantages of international trading and the introduction of superior western technologies and capitals, Shanghai's role as China's window was reinforced by the growing business success and political demands. Shanghai was not just a conventional Chinese city any more. Rather, it was always perceived as a city with strong western influence and characteristics. In fact, Shanghai was considered as the most cosmopolitan city in the Far East before 1949 when communists took over the whole mainland China.

The role of window resulted in the prevalent eclecticism as the primary building style and created unprecedented popular consumption culture as the primary life style in Shanghai. In architecture, buildings had forms from different styles to highlight the interaction of different cultural features. With the application of eclecticism, different architectural styles were integrated together to shape a new style which created a strong exotic image. As a result, building appearances started to separate from building contents and functions. However, the exotic building appearance defined a unique spatial quality in order to satisfy people's curiosity about a different culture through a window. Therefore, the



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urban spaces of Shanghai indicated a strong “window” effect – Chinese people saw Western existences while the Westerners found Chinese tastes.

During the semi-colonial era, the development of eclecticism in architecture generated two iconic architectural landmarks in Shanghai – the Shanghai Bund and the Shikumen style dwelling. The former, a group of large scale bizarre buildings along the Huangpu River, was the main stage for showcasing the city’s growing stature as a significant nexus of international trade and finance, reflecting the Western presence and mirroring the idea of how Shanghai’s power holders saw themselves and how they wanted to be seen from the outside. The latter with its mixed architectural elements from the West and local Chinese architectural features introduced a distinctive housing type, which not only met the demand of increasing urban density but also highlighted the differences from other Chinese dwellings. The distinctive spatial features demonstrated different life styles and cultural practices. As a

Figure 1: Shanghai Bund in the 1940s by Aurthur Smith. Source: University of Nebraska-Lincoln Library

Figure 2: The well-preserved birth place of the Chinese Communist Party at Shanghai is a Shikumen style dwelling.

result, residents could easily and quickly recognize the uniqueness of living in Shanghai through residential architectural features.

For Shanghai, the most significant character that made it distinctive from other Chinese cities was its cosmopolitan trait shaped by close tie to the West and strong presence of the Western existence. As a result, the development of Shanghai's identity and perception inevitably highlighted this cultural tie and Western influence. However, the development of Shanghai, particularly its close tie to the West, and the growing presence of Western influence also marked one of the most humiliated moments in China's history – China was defeated and forced to open to the West by the growing Western forces. This generated a large dilemma: the identity of Shanghai actually conflict the unforgettable national humiliation.

The political contexts were exploited to solve this problem. In the first half of the 20th century, China's central government was in decay while Shanghai was administered by pre-West leaders and a municipal council composed by a group of international businessmen. With the objective to develop Shanghai into an international trading center, the local government tried to minimize its inference on business and cultural issues. Consequently, the political meanings of the eclectic architectural forms and the tie to the West were taken away. In the meantime, the Western presence and influence were promoted by business leaders as examples of modernity that all Chinese cities should learn from. Through this depoliticization process, the prevalence of eclecticism was strengthened because without political implications, architectural styles only performed as visual symbols to create strong exotic features for people's curiosities.

SOCIALISTIC SHANGHAI

The communist victory in 1949, as an important historical event, entirely changed the identity of Shanghai developed in the past 100 years. All city's ties to the West were cut off and most international residents went back to their home countries. With the establishment of socialistic ideology nationwide, the core value of Shanghai was converted from consumption to production. Having the most workers in the nation, this city was reformed to be the leader of China's socialistic industrialization. In the first time in history, Shanghai was strictly administered by both the central government and the local government. Thus, its role was designated rather than being formed naturally.

Due to the strong Western influence and the huge contrast to socialistic ideology, the consumption culture in Shanghai was criticized as "parasitic" and the city was also called "headquarter of anti-revolutionary." In order to create new socialistic core value of Shanghai and complete the transformation from consumption city to production city, the government provided strategic support to expand the city's industrial capacity by building large factories and recruiting young workers. As a result, Shanghai became a window again – not a window for exotic images but a new window through which people can see the successful socialistic transformation. As an example to other Chinese cities and international visitors, Shanghai demonstrated the effectiveness and efficiency of socialistic transformation – even the former "headquarter of anti-revolutionary" had successfully established socialistic core values and life styles and transformed into a "revolutionary headquarter".

Corresponding to those changes, the eclectic buildings were not considered as the iconic symbol of Shanghai anymore because those architectural languages reflected Western influence, an ideological enemy of the socialistic transformation. The new icon of Shanghai was not any built environment but a specific group of people – the proletariat class, Shanghai workers.

In this period, the self-isolation political situation of China resulted in the role of Shanghai as the window to showcase socialistic development for domestic audiences. The portrait of workers in Shanghai was more like creating a socialistic stage for a show. However, the branding of Shanghai's new identity was not successful because the image of Shanghai workers failed to demonstrate distinctive characters from workers in other Chinese cities.

POST-SOCIALISTIC SHANGHAI

In the end of the 1970s, China underwent a large policy change. Maoist socialistic practices were abandoned and the new open-door policy encouraged market-oriented reforms and private business. Responding to this change, Shanghai's role changed again. The strategy of developing a window of economic reform and create a locus for stimulating regional economic growth was recognized in national development plan. Shanghai's reopening in early 1990s symbolized the further development of the national open-door policy. This time, Shanghai was initiatively open to the world with strong national supports. Since the 1990s, Shanghai has regained the role as China's paragon of modernity, and also as the harbinger of China's future.

Once again, Shanghai reformulated its role as a window like the one before 1949 – for Chinese to contact the outside and for foreigners to see the new image of China. However, there were also some fundamental differences. First, the central government actively engaged in the reformulation of the window function and brought policies and regulations to adjust the development of window function according to the changing political and economic contexts, while the local government became the supportive entity, helping the central government to achieve its objective. Second, the Westerners were not the primary audiences. Rather, a lot of efforts were focused on Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and oversea Chinese population. Third, Shanghai possessed sufficient resources to brand its new images and develop its new identity.

Architectural heritages gained new attentions through another round of depoliticalization. The government interpreted colonial buildings as valuable historical landmarks which could promote tourism and the formulation of new local culture. On one hand, Shanghai needs to re-stress its long history of being the most cosmopolitan city in China and having the strong tie with the West. On the other hand, the city wants to showcase China's economic and political rise as a nascent superpower via Shanghai's urban transformation. Unlike what occurred 130 years ago, the new depoliticalization did not fully strip off the political meaning from eclectic building elements. Rather, the depoliticalization was achieved by putting new political interpretations for new perception. The eclectic features of architectural heritages as well as buildings with strong colonial styles were considered the representation of Shanghai's cosmopolitan history and unique culture of openness. This new interpretation paved a way for the introduction of new architectural features from the West by the arrival of international architects and planners. Also, the new interpretation brought the prevalence of so called "European Style" in Shanghai's



Figure 3: Cover of a book about how workers in a small factory in Shanghai made great efforts for socialistic transformation.



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Figure 4: View of the Shanghai Pudong and the bund from the top of Shanghai World Trade Center.

building design during the 1990s and 2000s. The “European Style” described approaches with applications of Western classical architectural vocabularies and orders. Creating collective memories of past glory, this generated buildings with complicated mixtures of Western architectural symbols and styles. In fact, the application of “European Style” was a result of the combination of eclectic architecture and new consumption culture.

Shanghai’s new move leads to the emphasis of symbolic architectural language for the purpose of branding the city. During the past two decades, Shanghai has completed dozens of landmark buildings with unique forms and big scales. Although those buildings have various architectural approaches and design features, all of them are more like displays of city images than exciting spaces that innovatively improve the quality of urban environment and people’s lives. Every building is seeking to bigness and highness which can be easily achieved by physical forces. However, it is hard to see any revolutionary design or innovative concept in Shanghai. The prevalence of symbolic buildings in Shanghai, in fact, reveals that the social life of Shanghai is for “look”, not for “live”. This is probably the consequence of Shanghai’s “window” role – through a window, people see an image, not individuals’ life. Hence, the external appearance of buildings and the visual representation of architecture become more important than the actual designs. As a carrier of producing and showcasing mixtures of styles, buildings do not need new and innovative

design ideas. Rather, it is critical to choose appropriate building styles for certain demands of consumption culture and branding.

CONCLUSION

Buildings and architectural languages have hitherto been strategies used by cities to boost their development and global prominence. However, different cities should indicate different patterns of branding strategies, discourse and finally images according to their own political and historical contexts. The three major turns of roles played by Shanghai were determined by its historical and political transformation. As a result, the Shanghai pattern indicates unique features of branding process. Through different roles of windows for different audiences, Shanghai formulated its branding strategies and developed its branding discourse. Through depoliticalization, Shanghai makes reinterpretations of Western influence that has shaped and is still shaping the development of Shanghai identity and image.

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