

The metropolis and the capital: Shanghai and Beijing as paradigms of space

Historically, China has been culturally multivalent, with a heterogeneous range of cultures operating within the larger paradigm of the country as a whole. Today, this tension is best realised in the Chinese coastal metropolis, Shanghai, and the inland ‘northern capital,’ Beijing, two cities equally convinced of their centrality, with systems of spatial organisation that, in addition to being completely at odds with each other, ratify their own roles. In so doing, they offer two equally valid models for other Chinese cities (the so-called ‘second tier’ and ‘third tier’ cities) to follow.

Jacob Dreyer



Tiananmen Square. ‘The center of the capital represents the political power by which it has subjugated its territory. This center, sporadically alive with the comings and goings of its representatives, is often apparently vacant...’
Photo: Flickr Photostream.

‘SHANGHAI AND BEIJING SEEM to have similar urban symbolic resonance within China, as do Paris, London and New York in their national contexts,’¹ commented an urban planning scholar recently, missing the point that the centrality of Paris, London and New York is uncontested in their countries: all three are considered global cities, a role that isn’t truly accorded to any other cities within their respective countries.

Beijing and Shanghai are both consciously jockeying for this global city status within a China that, still in the midst of finding its own version of modernity, has not yet crystallised around a single urban space. If China can truly become a ‘middle kingdom,’ moving from the global periphery to the centre, a spatial and cultural practice that is equally compelling to those of Western countries will have to be formed, echoing the logic developed in one of these two competing metropolises. The hugely different dynamics of Beijing and Shanghai – arising from very different cultural, geographic, and political factors – mean that the city, which becomes the central, defining space of the new China will, in effect, have imposed its own spatial logic on the rest of the country; indeed, both cities seem to be attempting to do so. The spatial dynamics of the cities are not irrelevant to the nature of social relations within them; the architectural typologies express the configuration of the city as social space, the dominant types reflect a ‘deep structure,’ making visible the ideology which constructed them. ‘It is the building... in which the ideology of all ‘imagined communities’ ...is contained, materialized and symbolized,’ writes Anthony King,² and this seems especially resonant in China, where contemporary architecture has reached its apogee.

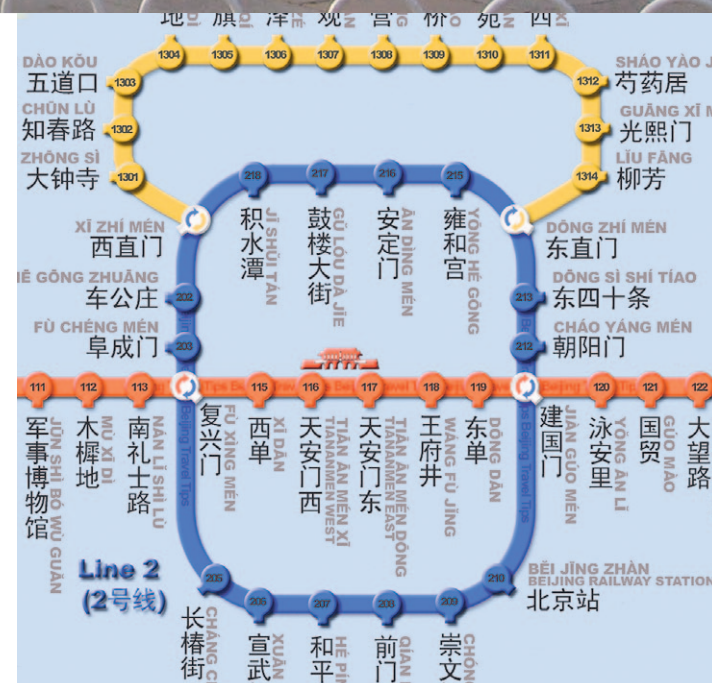
Beijing, the political capital, is often given precedence in national discourses, controlled as those are by a centralising state based in Beijing, which has both explicitly and implicitly used media, concentration of academic and cultural institutions and language standardisation that posit Beijing as the true ‘centre’ of China.³ For Hung Wu, the spiritual centre of Beijing is Tiananmen Square.⁴ The urban design of Beijing – concentric ring roads – would seem to suggest that in a cultural sense, all of Beijing is suburb to the Forbidden City, an impression that is equally apparent on subway maps. Wu Hung writes that immediately after the 1949 revolution, the planner Chen Gan ‘identified the city’s traditional zero point... all other architectural features were subordinate to this absolute centre, while reinforcing it.’⁵ In fact, not only Beijing but the entire country itself can be said, in the vision suggested by Beijing’s planners and officials, to be centered around Tiananmen, ‘a freestanding front [which] can thus have a large architectural complex- city or country- as its ‘metaphorical body.’⁶

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A China in which all roads lead to state power is one, necessarily, which revolves around the Forbidden City (or its contemporary equivalent, the Zhongnanhai complex directly adjacent to it). The continuity with the previous imperial tradition is clear; one may say that the slight shift of absolute state power from the Forbidden City to Zhongnanhai, ‘signified only the changing of leaders, not a new concept of leadership,’⁷ nor a new concept of the distribution of power throughout space. Whatever the ambitions of the revolutionaries of 1989, total power would still reside in the centre of Beijing, a city incessantly described by textbooks, propaganda organs and even tourism bureaus to be a cosmic diagram, an astounding and bizarre claim.⁸

Clearly, this diagram is in the form of a gigantic altar surrounding a ‘gate of heavenly peace,’ (to literally translate Tiananmen), designed primarily for the use of emperors, now claimed by their contemporary successors. This metaphor of a gate between heaven and earth still dictates the logic of the capital today: policy on high is translated into immediate political reality in Beijing. Beijing envisions itself as culturally central to China, a vision which itself defines culture as hierarchical, residing in closely guarded legacies of the imperial past in the Palace Museum, Forbidden City, etc. This vision, demanding even the subversion of language for its realisation, has no room for local dialects or ethnic difference, even representing China’s 56 ethnic groups with Han Chinese.⁹ This narrative crystallises around the political space of the centre of Beijing and its realisation requires its imposition and universal acceptance. This centre, however, is strangely deserted, echoing Anne Querrien’s concept of the capital: ‘The centre of the capital represents the political power by which it has subjugated its territory. This centre, sporadically alive with the comings and goings of its representatives, is often apparently vacant... it is never the heart of metropolitan life.’¹⁰

Shanghai is another story altogether. It is a series of centres, having at least three zones in different areas understood by Shanghai residents as ‘downtown’.¹¹ To once more use Querrien’s terms, Shanghai ‘offers its own mode of space-time to those for whom the principles of a sovereign people and a nation state do not apply.’ Shanghai’s gaze, when not narcissistically directed at its own image, is directed at the world outside of China. Shanghainese have no doubt about the privileged status of their city; if it doesn’t really rival Beijing in political terms, that’s because politics is Beijing’s game and Shanghai isn’t playing. Though Shanghai, almost by definition, has no centre like Tiananmen,¹² the Oriental Pearl Tower is as indicative of Shanghai’s spatial practices as Tiananmen is to Beijing. As with Tiananmen, it is both



Beijing’s metro map, which in addition to subway stops, displays the symbolic heart of the city. Image courtesy beijingtraveltips.com.

symbol and centre of the city, a monument that has real social meaning as an organising principle. If the square materialises the logic of collective gathering made monumental, the tower gives life to an entirely different logic of social organisation. The tower, built for the broadcast of television signals, is clearly spectacular in its nature: as Jay Pridmore writes, 'the Oriental Pearl TV tower... was Shanghai's first attempt to create an instantly recognizable architectural signature. The building would serve not only for transmission, but as a centrepiece of Pudong.'¹³ It was seen as being central to the view of the Pudong New Area (an area that was largely unpopulated at the time of its construction) and the building was meant to be viewed from Puxi, the area on the opposite side of the river where the majority of residents live. In addition, the structure acts as a viewing tower itself. This triple function of spectacle – transmitting spectacle, enacting spectacle, and enabling spectacle – exemplifies the language of Shanghai's skyline. 'Much of the admiration for Shanghai is based on visual evidence. Just look at Shanghai's impressive and imposing skyline and the conclusion is obvious,'¹⁴ writes an economist. Shanghai's baroque frippery is not a coincidence but fundamental to the perception that it is the natural economic centre of China. Shanghainese writers have noted the commercial character of the city; Wang Anyi writes of the Shanghai opera of the 1920s that 'The singing resembled everyday conversation, and the subject was the bitterness of not having the necessities of life, such as rice and salt – a far cry from... Peking opera, consumed by lofty ideas such as loyalty and patriotism.'¹⁵

It is worth noting that the names of both cities denote their geographic positions. If Beijing defines itself as the capital of the north, Shanghai epitomises the culmination of a different folkway and tradition, that of the water cities of the Yangtze river plain; the city's name situates it on the upper reaches of the Huangpu river. Ranciere recently wrote of the chaotic populism of port life, 'a disease that comes from the port, from the predominance of maritime enterprise governed entirely by profit and survival. Empirical politics, that is to say democracy, is identified with the maritime sovereignty of the lust for possession.'¹⁶ This feeling is still present in the streets of the old quarters of Shanghai, for example in large swathes

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of the Huangpu and Hongkou districts; places that truly seem designed for communal living, daily rituals of buying and selling, chatting and living in a street whose role is situated between public and private. This is, of course, a democracy completely different from the one that elite students demonstrated in favour of in Tiananmen Square: 'The social ideal of the metropolis is a democracy in which citizens of various origins stand at an equal distance from each other... however, in its quest for a world market, the metropolis encourages a limitless economic expansionism which completely overrides this ideal.'¹⁷ Indeed, the social mobility that is so often cast as vulgarity in Beijing is Shanghai's most redeeming feature: as Wang Anyi wrote of a building on Shanghai's Bund, 'it was designed to look down over everything, impressing viewers with an air of tyrannical power. Fortunately, behind these magnificent buildings was an expanse of narrow streets and alleys that led to the longtang houses, whose spirit was democratic.' These same longtang are now being demolished for reasons of hygiene,¹⁸ recalling Louis Chevalier's remarks about the same process in Paris:¹⁹

As for the filthiness, [they] were adapted to the imagined unhealthiness... that is, their own uncleanness, which they were used to and even appreciated.²⁰

The hygiene problem of Shanghai is perhaps less the bacteria that might germinate than the ideas and men that may spring unplanned from the lively backstreets of the city; the secret to the city's famous economic vitality is the independent spirit that so disturbs Beijing's political vision. For this view does not privilege politics, nor the sacred spaces of Beijing, in the least; the rules of the market apply here, where all distinctions of culture and tradition are valued at best as commodities to be sold. While this has indisputably given the city the kitschy veneer of a Fabergé egg, it has also helped, inadvertently, to dismantle ancient structures of domination, simply by carelessly failing to take account of them.

A recent book about Beijing, recounting the choice of the ill-starred OMA design for the CCTV tower, tells us that 'the choice of such a spectacular and grandiose solution... was dictated by the explicit desire to compete with other metropolises, especially Beijing's Chinese rivals of Shanghai and Guangzhou.'²¹ The fate of this tower may have convinced Beijing's planners to leave the skyscrapers to the experts, as their own pompous claims to be the authentic source of Chinese culture literally exploded. As office workers set off fireworks in one of the buildings in the complex to celebrate Chinese New Year, the building caught fire; the CCTV tower that was to be the spectacular centrepiece rivalling Shanghai's TV tower currently sits unoccupied. However, Beijing has its own monumentality, which is just as grand if not grander than Shanghai's: the point being that two completely different power structures are being monumentalised. The two cities' spatial organisation reveals two entirely different urban cultures and, at this point, it would be presumptuous to claim that one or the other has proven dominant in the competition for global city status. It is clear, however, that whichever city becomes the central space of the Chinese imagination will bring with it its cultural, economic, and social model, as well as the monuments of that model.

For all these avowed differences, the two cities are, though locked in competition, in some respects mirror images of each other. Those who take the budget flight from Shanghai-Hongqiao to the old Beijing airport – stepping from the Shanghai metro into the taxi into the airplane into the taxi into the Beijing metro – may feel that they are somehow trapped inside the same labyrinthine form, one that contracts every year (as, for example, when the new high-speed train link is built, making the cities only five hours' apart by land). While subtle differences remain – the accent of subway announcements, the greater humidity in the air in Shanghai, calling streets 'jie' instead of 'lu' – and the cities' spatial programmes are defined by their opposition to each other, this is precisely what makes them partners or twins. The truth is that the daily lives of the two cities resembles each other in a way that no other Chinese city can claim; they are worlds apart, but still unified by whatever mystical quality the Chinese government judges to be 'first-tier' about them.²² Their differences are significant, though: Beijing representing a China subjugated to state power, to urban planning that often disregards traditional neighbourhoods and to an ethnic nationalism (one, moreover, that proclaims local identities and dialects to be subversive of the national project); Shanghai representing a China that is dominated by foreign investment, characterised by greater ethnic diversity and openness to social progressivism, but which is perhaps compromised by a past and present relation to foreigners that seems uncomfortably colonial to many. The competition causes mutually felt tension and citizens of the two cities (Chinese and expatriate), locked into competition, stereotype each other mercilessly. For Beijingers, Shanghainese are superficial, arrogant, obsessed with fashion, and lacking in culture; for Shanghai residents, Beijing seems

drab, overly policed, dirty, poorly planned and generally vulgar. The contrast between the two is crucial to China's future – will it look like Shanghai, with its endless crowded shopping malls, visible foreign population and economic dynamism? Or will it resemble more Beijing, with its homogenising, nationalist vision of a China where academics, artists and officials alike come to the capital? To ask where the de facto capital of China will be is to ask whether the future of China will be dominated by the state or by non-state economic actors. Just as Beijing's Olympics brought the formidable power of the state to bear, so Shanghai's Expo – built on a different economic structure of coalition between the city government, foreign investment and investment from state-owned enterprises – today reveals its own unique strengths. Both spectacles were primarily aimed at the domestic Chinese population, showing China its own cities, which have recently taken on new forms, as much as displaying itself to the outside world. The model that China is lurching towards is still uncertain and the clashes between the metropolis and the capital stage the internal divisions for the world.

Jacob Dreyer
London Consortium
jacobaugustsdreyer@gmail.com

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2. King, Anthony D. 2004. *Spaces of Global Cultures: Architecture Urbanism Identity*. London: Routledge. King, co-author of the influential article 'On Beijing in the World: Postmodernism, Globalization, and the Making of Transnational Space in China, can scarcely be unaware of the implications of this statement in China; indeed, the book quoted addresses spatial issues in China directly.
3. Mandarin, based on Beijing dialect, implies that Beijing is standard and Shanghai, Guangzhou, Sichuan etc., more or less aberrations or 'local,' perhaps reflecting tensions in the placement of Chinese culture that go back to the Three Kingdoms period.
4. Wu, Hung. 2005. *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space*. London: Reaktion.
5. Ibid. p.8.
6. Ibid. p.53.
7. Ibid. p.72.
8. www.chinatour360.com/beijing/forbidden-city/ is one example; however, a google search for 'Beijing cosmic diagram' quickly turns up many results. In contrast, Shanghai cosmic diagram turns up nothing specific to the urban form.
9. 'The children supposedly representing the country's 56 ethnic groups were in fact all from the same one, the majority Han Chinese race,' www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/othersports/olympics/2561979/Beijing-Olympics-Ethnic-children-exposed-as-fakes-in-opening-ceremony.html.
10. Querrien, Anne. 1986. *Zone 1/2*. New York: Urzone, NY, 219-222.
11. People's Square, Lujiazui, Xujiahui, not to mention the French Concession, Jing'an Temple, Zhongshan Park, etc.
12. The metropolis is a membrane that allows communication between two or more milieus, while the capital serves as a nucleus around which these milieus are rigorously organised.
13. Pridmore, Jay. 2008. *Shanghai: The Architecture of China's Great Urban Center*. New York: Abrams. p.1.
14. Huang, Yasheng. 2008. *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the State*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press. p. 177.
15. Wang, Anyi. 2010. *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow: A Novel of Shanghai*. Weatherhead Books on Asia - New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press. p.182.
16. Ranciere, Jacques, trans. Liz Heron. 2007. *The Shores of Politics*. New York, London: Verso Books. p.1.
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19. See also, Harvey, David. 2003. *Paris, Capital of Modernity*. New York: Routledge. pp. xi, 372.
20. Chevalier, Louis. trans. David P. Jordan. 1994. *The Assassination of Paris*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 212.
21. Greco, Claudio and Carlo Santoro. 2008. *Beijing: The New City*. Milan, New York: Skira (distributed in North America by Rizzoli International Publications) p.104.
22. Though Guangzhou is also considered a first-tier city, this must surely be interpreted as a tantrum on the part of the Chinese state; the dominant urban imaginary of the Pearl River Delta is clearly Hong Kong, and just as clearly, the Chinese state would like to minimise that fact.



Above: Shanghai Skyline. 'The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.' Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, thesis 4. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>, accessed May 15, 2010. Image by Franziska Mothes, used with permission.

Below: Shanghai's identity as cosmopolitan is central to the identity it represents to itself and others, an identity which is immediately commodified. Photograph of Jinfeng Wine advertisement, taken in Shanghai Metro's South Railway Station by Ryan Carter. Used with permission.

