Modern Chinese Civilization in Shanghai Cityscape

Jun-xuan WANG

1Fudan Eastern Dormitory Area No 440 Guoding Rd Shanghai China

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Abstract. In comparison with other major cities in the world, Shanghai’s spatial structure can be described as a unique hallowed concentric circle, as an interactive result of Shanghai’s history, its economic development model, its government administration and land ownership style. This perspective also explains the urban decay, gentrification and over planning undergoing currently in Shanghai, and points out a future profile for Shanghai and even a glimpse into the modern Chinese civilization as a whole.

Introduction

Cities all over the world are symbols of civilizations. Great cities like Paris, London, New York, Vienna, Istanbul, Tokyo and Cairo are a country’s history in themselves. The diverse cultures of the world, from ancient times to post-industrial ages, are displayed in the forms of architectures, streets, and spatial structure of these cities. Even within a country, for example, the central axial planning, enclosed courtyard dwellings and royal palaces of ancient Beijing and Xi’an illustrate different aspect of the Chinese civilization in comparison to the water channel based neighborhood, Jiangnan style housings and private gardens in old Suzhou. While cities like Beijing and Suzhou represents the ancient civilization of China, Shanghai typically stands for the modern culture of China, with its classical grid planning of the concessions, Sino-European mixture of Shikumens, bund buildings as well as modern CBD in Lujiazui Region and huge newly built apartment areas. Cityscape is a combination of the streets, buildings, parks and all other artificial components that make up the city [1]. Although a cityscape is something on the surface layer of the city, it provides an insight into the city’s underlying economic and political history. How the streets are arranged, what the buildings look like, what is the function and characteristic of each city block, can often tell us important facts about a city’s historical heritage, government behavior, land ownership and industry structure, etc.

Functioning as China’s most important economic center and international financial hub, Shanghai, as a fact, also represents the whole modernization history of China from before the Communist Revolution to the recent decades of Reform and Opening period, which is something few other Chinese cities are comparable. Therefore, the study into Shanghai opens to us with a window of understanding upon modern Chinese cities and the culture that they resemble. Knowledge is best achieved through contrast; a comparison of Shanghai with other key global cities in the world will show us the uniqueness of Shanghai’s cityscape and the economic development model behind. Moreover, it also helps to evaluate and debate over the advantages and flaws of the Chinese model, and picture out what Shanghai’s cityscape might have look like if alternative path of development were taken, so as to offer an optional profile in Shanghai’s future development.

Shanghai Cityscape as a Hallowed Concentric Circle

In spite of the various definitions to Shanghai’s spatial structure by city planning researchers, I would like to describe Shanghai as Hallowed Concentric Circle, largely centralized and loosely multi centered. This is different from most of the cities in the western world, especially cities in the USA, which are more or less typically centralized with certain concentric circle structures. Elaborations are as follows with comparison between Shanghai and New York.
It is easy to imagine a city in the structure of a concentric circle. In the very center of the city, high density central business districts take place and make the land price the highest in the city. Outside and around the center area, buildings grow sparser little by little, with their height drops, and residential areas gradually take place of the business districts. Further away from the city center, huge suburbs dominate the cityscape, with one to three story houses and their backyards, or in the case of an industrious city, industry blocks locate in this area with factories and warehouses.

New York City is a typical concentric circle where Midtown and Downtown Manhattan locate in the very geographical center of the city, serving as the central business districts with their remarkable cityscape of skyline, skyscrapers and crowded streets. The other parts of Manhattan and adjacent boroughs that surround the central business districts serve as the mixture of business and residential region, where tall living apartments for public housing dominate the cityscape. While further away from the city center, in Brooklyn, Queens and New Jersey, suburbs take place, where the local residents enjoy low density and much greenery, but have to withstand long commuting time. [2].

In Shanghai, it is a different story, where its geographic center, or the center point of the concentric circle, is the area of the old foreign concession. Although it was partly reconstructed, the old city still largely remains its historical buildings, including many Shikumen residential areas, the villas in the French concession and traditional Jiangnan style housings in the Chenghuangmiao region [3]. The so-called the central concession area between Huangpu River, Suzhou Creek, Xizang Road and Yan’An Road was built in or before the 1930s, where many of the buildings are preserved today, showing a city style very similar to New York. There are high density rectangular road grids, with square shape blocks for tall buildings to squeeze in, where on the bound stand the most splendid Baroque style mansions at the time in the Eastern Hemisphere; and next to the Horse Racing Court, now Renmin park, art-deco style buildings use to be the skyscrapers of the day. At time goes by, those once huge buildings are nowadays dwarfed by Shanghai’s new business centers surrounding the old foreign concession in all directions, as Lujiazui Region sitting to the east side, Xujiahui Region sitting to the south west side, along with other two modern business districts of Central Jing’An Region and the Shanghai Railway Station Regions locating to the west and the north of the old city respectively. To the south, the Expo Center Region is emerging as a new city center, together with whom, there forms a complete circle of skyscrapers surrounding the old central city, and turns the once great old city nowadays the hollow bottom of a concrete forest basin and creates the special concentric circle structure of Shanghai.

The Formation of Shanghai Cityscape in History

To understand the special cityscape formation of Shanghai against other western cities, we try to seek clues from the history through comparison of the historical similarity and difference between Shanghai and another city such as New York. In New York’s case, its cityscape development history can be roughly summarized as “keep building on top of itself”. New York was first named as New Amsterdam by the Dutch, when it was a walled fort on the lower tip of Manhattan, right below modern day downtown Manhattan. As the history of the 13 colonies went on and after the establishment of USA, New York gradually became the major port in North America and thus welcomed rapid development. The city soon expanded and covered all of Manhattan, even though the tip of Manhattan remained as the city center [4]. As land price rose, land owners tore down old buildings and rebuilt on spot with much taller and fancier ones. To ensure the continuous growth of land price, they enhanced the neighborhood environment and streets. With more Investors poured in, the central business districts kept expanding vertically and horizontally, which attracted more new immigrants into the city, then expanded the suburbs greatly as a result.

Shanghai’s cityscape was very similar to that of New York in the early 20th century, when it was as same as an international port and finance center, also under Western (American, British, French, German, Japanese, etc.) administrations. The building style and street arrangement of the central district of the concessions was no different from Manhattan, Hong Kong or other newly
developed international cities at that time, representing China’s first opening to the world. However, Shanghai took a different approach of development after the Revolution in 1949, when the city center ceased to develop anymore. Factories were constructed around the city as an effort of industrialization, and vast residential apartments belonging to “Danwei”, or socialist working units that overwhelm citizens’ entire family lives, were constructed collectively for the workers. The size of the city expended greatly in statistics numbers, even though Shanghai at that time didn’t actually look like a nominal city. Since normal Shanghai citizens contented their whole needs within a “Danwei”, rarely did they have any daily connections with the city center, and Shanghai was composed more or less with clusters of “Danwei”, each functioning as a small self-sufficient village. It changed only after 1990s, when the so called “Reform and Opening” generated great leap forward to Shanghai’s economy, while the low density industrial areas or even rural areas were quickly tore down and replaced with modern skyscrapers. However, the central old city was still left behind, in which attention was paid only to a few buildings designated for tourist attractions or real estate purposes, while most of the old buildings in this area remained shabby or were left mal repaired, where eventually the business atmosphere die out[3]. Among those once great architectures of the old city, the Shikumen apartments are under constant threat of being demolished, as part of the gentrification process. Business buildings in the former Central district, international concession, which was once the CBD of shanghai, have already lost their original function and become low value warehouses remaining empty. In Laochengxiang Region and Yangshupu Region, residential areas become homes of migrant workers and shopping streets become low-end wholesale market. Just in hundred meters north of the Nanjing Road, the most famous commercial center in recent China, old business districts have never been renewed since 1950s and gradually fades into slum areas, as a great contradiction to its ideal location, surrounding land marks and buzzing history. The city fabric in the old concession faced destruction, the few new developments no longer followed the original road plan and arbitrarily replaced old city blocks. All of above contributed to a distinguished gap of development level between the central city and the surrounding areas, where local residents fail to share any economic growth, and eventually face relocation and gentrification. It is reported that such city center hallowing and gentrification is also a natural phenomenon in certain western cities [5], but few cause so much impact to the spatial structure of a city as in Shanghai.

The Underlying Economic and Governance Forces behind the City Profiles

Shanghai’s Hallowed Concentric Circle structure is mainly caused by government oriented urban development planning that interplays with the market, while cities in the USA are built mainly by private financiers, with the government providing infrastructure management only[6].

The way how Shanghai’s urban development shapes its present cityscape is in close relation with the history of Shanghai after the revolution. The forty years before the Reform and Opening saws major industry development in Shanghai, when Shanghai at the peak alone generated ten percent of China’s gross domestic product. State owned units or “Danwei” constructed vast areas of public apartments for their workers, making the living condition of Shanghai citizens enviable by rest of Chinese. However, city construction and infrastructure building at that stage was relatively slow due to financial shortage. As a powerhouse of whole China, only an ignorable percentage of Shanghai’s revenue contributed to the central government could be distributed back to the city itself, which limited the endeavors for city construction and infrastructure improvement.

After the 1990s, the Reform and Opening created new opportunities for all Chinese cities, to maintain its “dragon head” position in China economy, Shanghai must take up a new approach towards economic growth.

Shanghai municipality government followed and optimized some successful experience of other Asian countries like Japan and Korea, and transformed itself into a developmental type of government, and relied more and more heavily on land financing, which is based on the overwhelm government land ownership in China. Land financing is a process in which the government acts like a
real estate broker, tries to acquire lands as cheap as possible through expropriation and relocation, and then tries to add value to the land until leasing it to domestic and overseas investors. The key to this process is the value added part, which is usually achieved by combined measures of city planning, city promotion, infrastructure construction, tax exemption, investment by the state owned companies and loans from state controlled development banks, etc. Those numerous channels of governance and market interventions help attract enormous foreign investment, grow the city and economy, thus increase tax income, and more importantly, increase the land value [7]. As a result, it makes cities like Shanghai capable of carrying out any grand urban development plan, for example, the Pudong project.

Pudong was an area of nobody’s interest, of low density warehouses, obsolete factories and rural farmlands just before the 1990s, and is separated from the city center by a river. When a state policy was set up to develop Pudong, the government broke away all the barriers, and took various measures legislatively, administratively and financially, even with the establishment of the Pudong Development Bank, an extremely big stuff at the time. As a result, the government managed to complete a central business district in Pudong’s Lujiazui Area on top of nothing within not more than a decade time, and poured in with hundreds of international financing and other business firms. Land price of the area thus rose tremendously, which made the government extremely rich [11].

Like in many other cities, the land financing model was carried out in various scales all over Shanghai, with two major impacts to Shanghai’s cityscape. First, the new city area was usually planned on the whole, including fancy wide boulevards and futuristic buildings that created a strong contradiction with the old city. Second, those new business districts were mainly constructed in the edge of the old city, for example, Xujiahui Region, Expo Center Region, Shanghai Railway Station Region, etc., where expropriation was relatively cheaper, thus forming a ring of skyscrapers surrounding the old city.

Municipal governments in American cities like New York also play some important roles in constructing the cities, but react in different ways from their Chinese partners. The New York City government is much more reliant on taxes rather than land leasing revenues. The federal constitution grants each state and county with considerable self-administrative power, including the right to manage a large proportion of local tax revenue. In the stage of 1930s, despite the great depression, the New York City enjoyed tremendous development in infrastructure, when New York’s most famous mayor in its history, Mr. La Guardia, were capable of getting federal funds from president Roosevelt’s New Deal policy and put infrastructure construction all under city financing, and eventually shaped the modern infrastructure of the city, enhanced the economy and generated more tax income to the government [6].

The American governments do own land, same as their peers in China, but the public land is usually in forests, mountains and national parks, far away from any city [7]. In and around the cities, land is mostly privately owned which is totally different from the case in China. The private land ownership together with its legalistic protection of private properties in the Democratic States like America makes it very costing if not very difficult for the government to carry out any expropriation. More importantly, without the channels to intertwine with the market, the government has no advantage over the private sector in real estate investment. Given the limited funds available and without any advantage over the market, American governments tend to avoid becoming entrepreneurial despite of the full enthusiasm from their peers in China. If the government do overcome great difficulties and carried out an expropriation, it will only be for infrastructure or public service purposes [10]. When the government carries out urban planning, it’s usually for regulation over private construction and is usually requested by the interest-relevant local land holders. This makes big difference to that in China where most urban planning is government initiative, since land in Chinese cities is mostly state-owned and cannot trade freely in the market [9].

Private financiers created much of the important constructions in New York. Private real estate firms behave very differently from the government in land investment, usually they are not so long-sighted as to build skyscrapers in the suburbs. As private investors seldom have any strategies or sufficient funds to influence the spatial master plan or land prices in a city, so their investment usually
follows the original cityscape and existing spatial structure of the city, continuing pushing already high land prices in city center even higher. This market driven investment process is made possible by the private ownership and free trade of land, with a consequence to the cityscape that new city center gradually appears on top of the existing old city center.

Discussion and Conclusion

Roma was not built overnight, nor is Manhattan in New York. But Lujiazui Region in Shanghai completed its shape all in all on top of a green field, within less than a decade, illustrating the efficiency of the Shanghai model, as a methodology and practice of state planning oriented city construction and state monopoly based economic development.

However, government planning may have created much more visionary plans, but also at the risk of greater failure. Unlike western cities, the pre-design city lacks freedom in growth. Once built up, it has limited room for future renewal. Even worse, should the intended value adding failed, the whole project could become a catastrophe, or a so called ghost town. Even after its success today, in the shadow of the skyscrapers, Lujiazui area lacks commercial atmosphere, given the facts that there are no street stores around, and the roads wasn’t pedestrian friendly. When people go shopping, they are turning back towards the old concession areas.

On the other hand, government controlled land leasing have driven houses prices unaffordable, creating great burden on the whole population as while as great risk in the economy, in addition to exaggeration, corruption and property unfairness. Nevertheless, as time goes by, government intertwining with the market is less and less efficient nowadays, when land resources become scarce and old industries suffer overcapacity. Government oriented investment gets less marginal benefits or poorer returns, as its result land financing mode of development has passed its peck.

As Shanghai steps forward towards a high income city, soon the Shanghai municipality government will be facing similar circumstances as their peers in New York City. There is a strong need to control land exploitation, stop inefficient investment and eventually transfer the government’s role to its original function. So instead of continuing acting as an entrepreneur or a player in the market, Shanghai Government is also expected to prioritize its efforts as a business controller, with focus in public service and infrastructure management only.

References