

Shanghai, the future on the other side of the world

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Special report from Shanghai

It is hard to imagine that just under 20 years ago, rice fields grew at the foot of the Jin Mao tower, a 420-meter high building that includes commercial offices and a 555-room hotel. The flooded fields used to extend along the banks of the windy Huangpu River. In 1990, when the world was barely assimilating the fall of the Iron Curtain, the district of Pudong was still producing food to feed Shanghai and other Chinese cities. Out of nothing, and the expression is not being used loosely, the emerald green fields turned into one of the most vibrant skylines on the planet. The jumble of skyscrapers of doubtful taste seems to have transplanted there. Next to the Jin Mao, the Chinese are finishing construction of the Shanghai World Financial Center, which will be the tallest building in China at 492 meters. When the sun sets, the shadows of these gigantic constructions advance over the city blocks. And then, as night sets in, a festival of spotlights and cannons of colorful lights emerges. Billboard boats parade with huge, high-definition screens. The image recalls science fiction movies or a casino of the 21st Century. This is the story of the incomparable construction orgy in Shanghai.

The clanging of steel, shrill drills, deafening hammer blows and shivers as the heavy metal beams are assemble compose the new symphony that drowned out the habitual noises of a metropolis. It is common to hear Chinese patriots exulting in a frenetic rhythm. They want Shanghai to be even taller, more futuristic, faster, more modern and more impetuous. And in order to get there, they are willing to face any sort of trial in a city where growth at any cost justifies the means. As if they were following a Mao Tse Tung motto to a T: "A good companion is one who is anxious to go where the difficulties are greatest."

The life of Jin and Zhang is restricted to a job site. They sleep on a mat on concrete blocks and wood screens. During the day, their faces look like those of workers at a limestone mine. The dust hides the thin and poorly shaved beard and whitens the black hair. They only have time to clean up at night. Soon their lodging at the construction will become a bright office with gas heating and air conditioning, so lacking in the frozen winters or sultry summers of China. In order to eat, the two have an electric stove, a luxury that only loses out to the 14-inch TV. There are no restaurants, grocery stores, supermarkets or pharmacies in the neighboring areas. Everything is under construction on this block of Suzhou Creek. They are happy because thanks to the work, they will be able to build a place for their children to live in the poor province of Jiangsu, north of Shanghai. The father of an oriental family considers it a question of honor to prepare the destination of his offspring. Jin, 43, has a 22 year old son; and Zhang, 45, has a 20 year old one.

"When I take fashion products home with me, I feel very proud and powerful," says Jin. "It is much easier to make money in Shanghai." The electrical appliances and shirts, pants and sweaters with Western brands that so enchant these two are the result of the 3,000 yuans (R\$ 700) they earn per month. A fortune. They only have one or two weeks of vacation per year. Throughout China, human resource companies specialize in contracting rural labor and outsourcing it to industry. This way, Jin and Zhang have guaranteed jobs. "We don't have any ambition or objectives, not at our age. Nothing very important is going to happen to us," says Zhang. "We just want our boys to have better lives."

This vertiginous growth has attracted millions of workers like Jin and Zhang to the urban area. Of the more than 15 million inhabitants, it is estimated that 4.5 million are migrants. Such a large mass of workers cheapens the supply of labor like rarely seen in the history of Humanity. This makes Professor Liu Cheng, of the College of Law and Politics at Shanghai University fear for the future: "We are going from being one of the equal nations on Earth to one of the most unequal." An adviser to the government on labor reform, the first since opening to a market economy, he warns that for China to offer cheap products, there are costs the other consumer nations are unwilling to pay. One is the salary paid the worker. The base salary is equivalent

to R\$ 280, whether in civil construction or at a factory. According to the professor, the American Chamber of Commerce opposed clauses that protected the rights of the Chinese, including one that would do away with the indirect hiring of labor. American unions can complain about unequal competition with Chinese products, but the corporations do not want to forgo cheap products. "Our workers could earn up to 50% more. We only want them to have the right to their share in this economic growth."

Shanghai is not an accident. In the 19th Century, the city was the busiest port in the country. The most cosmopolitan city in China was divided into concessions, territories controlled by the English, French, Americans, Russians and Japanese. The Chinese had restricted access to them. With the communist revolution of 1949, China became an obscure unknown for the West. The world suspected, but could not calculate the forced moving of millions from urban zones to the fields, or the quick execution of those who opposed the regime. Only after the mid-1980s, when the government decided to dive head first into a market economy, was Shanghai chosen to lead the transition. And it did not disappoint. The modern and innovative we see today did not exist in the 1990s. Chinese mega cities operate like nation states, with powerful and rich city halls, capable of making independent decisions. Members of the Communist Party, the mayors have the mission of making them prosper. And that is where the patriotic propaganda comes in: the government authorities make plans, business owners manage the works and the people are informed about yet another national feat over one of the seven channels of public and official TV.

In a regime where prices, minds and almost everything that can be controlled, is controlled, Shanghai took advantage by buying raw materials from other Chinese cities at minimum prices and selling its manufactured goods at overpriced values. Comrades of the Communist Party became rich assuming command of privatized companies. Today, the economy is based on heavy public investments from Chinese capitalists and foreign funds. With excess yuans in the market, the mega city has been growing at double digit rates.

In 2007, 13.3% compared to China's 11.9%. Seven sectors lead this growth: automotive, semiconductors, petrochemical, finance, commerce, real estate and construction. Pudong, with its skyscrapers, is a symbol of this economic dynamism. So much so that Shanghai residents say: "If Shanghai is conducting the Chinese economy, Pudong is conducting Shanghai." This financial district alone is home to 4 million people and hundreds of international offices avid to do business in China. More than 700 foreign architecture and engineering offices have set up bases in the city. In the world, only Beijing and Dubai rival Shanghai in the size and volume of investments. Upon deciding to take part in this gold rush, Danish architect Henrik Valeur, 42, knew he had to be in Shanghai. His stints in Copenhagen, Barcelona, Rotterdam and Los Angeles were important from a historical and architectural perspective, but they had one foot in the past.

"Shanghai's recent history shows that high speed and large scale urban development is possible," says Valeur. "It is an example of how to attack poverty on a global scale." Valeur, who was a judge at the 2007 São Paulo International Architecture Biennial, justifies his enthusiasm saying that over the past three decades, a contingent of 120 million people migrated from the rural zone, where they lived in extreme poverty, to the large Chinese cities. But these metropolises did not explode into shantytowns, as is the tendency in other parts of the planet. "The urbanization of Shanghai resembles Paris and London, which were not pleasant places in which to live, but nevertheless everyone wanted to be there."

Chinese, such as housewife Cheng Jin Hong, 48, feel the effects of accelerated growth better than anyone. She lives in Zhu Xing Port, one of the indistinct districts erected after the country fell into the hands of the communists. Her husband, a retired steel worker, got their apartment in one of the socialist housing projects for free. These are well-ventilated, three story buildings shared by families without any relationship among each other except for the fact they were inoffensive to the government. The constructions were never renovated.

The aluminum buckets can barely handle the leaks from the roofs on rainy days, and in some cases, these residences resemble slums. Despite being strangers before, the neighbors on Central Mountain South Street have become close over the years. They all have stories, like the considerate woman who raises chickens in

the backyard shared by all the residents of that block and who does not mind if the animals scratch about in litter in Jin Hong's kitchen. She does not mind; she likes living there. "It's always good to have people you know nearby as you get older," explains Jin Hong. But this chapter has a time and place to end. Tractors and trucks are already approaching. In a few weeks, machines will obliterate entire blocks from the map. The homes neighboring the woman who raises chickens are already disappearing. Life stories piled in ruins of dust and rubble. The space will soon gain very tall buildings, with elevators, controlled entry and segregating gates. "They said we should move. We are waiting."

The Chinese government's plan is to make Shanghai join forces with Tokyo and together become financial capitals just as influential as New York and London. Due to its strategic location at the mouth of the Yangtze delta, the third largest river in the world, tons of made in China merchandise passes through Shanghai. In 2005, less than four years after works began, the first phase of the Yanshan port was concluded, and it already moves 70 thousand tons of freight per day. It is a 10 square kilometer artificial island, erected far from the coast, a way to escape the congestion of all the ships at the dock. Engineers had to build a bridge in the high seas, Donghai, 32.5 kilometers long, that connects Shanghai to the mountain of sand-laden sediment. By 2021, the government intends to invest R\$ 19.5 billion in the project that wants to make Yanshan the largest commercial port on the planet.

Arriving in Shanghai today is to see the modern and the archaic merging to form something very peculiar. It is not unusual to find a tall, sophisticated glass building next to others with underwear hanging out the windows. Or to see imported cars exiting closed condominiums next to markets that sell from roasted chicken to live fish in plastic buckets. The Chinese like to live in community. There are people raising animals in backyards, cleaning the ears or cutting the hair of people they know in the street, playing cards. They feel every space is public.

And that explains the small number of parks and squares; there are only 288.7 km², or 4.5% of the size of this mega city. Today, a Shanghai resident occupies 15 square meters of inhabitable space, twofold more than before the reforms of 1949. In order to build a skyscraping downtown, the industries were forced into the suburbs. Four satellite cities were erected around Shanghai, each imitating German, Italian, Scandinavian and Chinese villages. Since they are distant and do not have good transportation, they did not flourish. At daybreak, Shanghai wakes up covered in a dense gray layer of toxic gases spewed out of the industries in the outskirts. And it stays that way all day long. It is the other side of progress. In a gesture of invitation to the world, the mega city plans on building the first ecological island, Chongming. The promise is to be ready by 2020. More than a satellite city, it wants to serve as a laboratory for sustainability. It will be connected to Shanghai, whose city hall will pay for the project, by a bridge that will cross the Yangtze River. The crossing, which today takes two hours, will be cut to 45 minutes. "Who is going to want to live so far away?" asks mototaxi driver Jun Hou, 35 years of age. He knows the traffic like few others, transporting passengers on a motorized tricycle. He makes about R\$ 556 per month. Hou does not complain about the confusing traffic or the pollution of Shanghai. The horns and heavy air are better than living in one of those satellite cities to where his parents moved. Inhabitant of the district of Puxi, married, father of one son, Hou was afraid he would not have what to do there. One day, he read in a newspaper that the government wants to reduce the number of bicycles and increase the number of cars. "They are right about the bicycles, but wrong about the cars. There are already too many of them and they don't respect the motorcycles."

The fleet of 2 million vehicles is small, but large enough to cause traffic jams. The automotive industry employs nearly half a million people and brings in R\$ 1.7 billion in taxes. It is necessary to keep the Chinese buying and driving the cars they manufacture. The goal by 2010 is to have 9500 kilometers of highways from several parts of the country to the Yangtze delta. Meanwhile, the strategy to reduce the number of bicycles is to diminish their confrontations with vehicles. The city government wants to remove one fourth of the 9 million units, but the Chinese ignore the measure and the new fad is to buy a battery-driven kit for R\$ 331. Without pedaling, it runs 30 kilometers per hour, an intelligent solution for a city without hills.

Especially with the expansion of the subway. The ambitious goals, thus far complied with to a T in the five-year plans (Shanghai is in its 11th), indicate the mega city will have 11 lines and 400 kilometers of subway by 2010. Today, there are 4 lines and an underground grid of 95 kilometers.

In the streets of the mega city, few places mention the Beijing Olympic Games. Shanghai residents only want to speak about Expo 2010, a world fair that will discuss the future of cities. It projects 70 million visitors. Twenty highways will be built connecting other cities to Shanghai, and 11 will lead to the Expo site, an area measuring 5.28 km² between the Nanpu and Lupu bridges, on the banks of the Huangpu River. The estimated cost is R\$ 7.8 billion. The real estate sector plans on launching one thousand new buildings by the date of the event. Everything in the way must go. The 140 year old Jiangnan Shipyard will be rebuilt elsewhere.

Even when the authorities recognize the importance of preserving history, a new business opportunity opens. In the district of Puxi, the Xintiandi neighborhood is preserving the French architecture from the concession period. Two large fossilized blocks by years of the Maoist Revolution have been incorporated by a foreign company that restored homes to serve as dozens of sophisticated restaurants and bars. This new address was ready in five years time at a cost of R\$ 249 million. That is where the first congress of the Chinese Communist Party was held in 1920. Today, it is a museum.

But the mega city likes to aim for the 21st Century and one of the pet projects is the futuristic Maglev bullet train. It cost R\$ 1.2 billion and it floats over rails at a speed of up to 430 km/h, covering the 30 kilometers to the international airport in 7 minutes. However, its final stop is 10 kilometers from the downtown, in the middle of nowhere. The high costs stopped the work from moving forward. The good, old taxi is still the most efficient. That's Shanghai: first build the future, and then find some use for it.