

Los Angeles versus Shanghai: the Battle for the Future

By Henrik Valeur, 2010

Abstract: Los Angeles and Shanghai can be seen as the contemporary counterparts to 19th century London and Paris. Not located on either side of the English Channel, but on either side of the Pacific Ocean, they are among the world's most dynamic cities - in terms of economic, environmental and social development. As two gigantic urban growth machines, powered by innovation and speculative investment, they are both absorbing huge numbers of poor people (poor latin-americans from the south and poor farmers from the west respectively) while at the same time generating unbelievable fortunes. For decades, Los Angeles has been synonymous with American sprawl while Shanghai is a vertical city of extreme density. They are like Yin and Yang, but, as in the Chinese symbol, one is also in the other and vice versa. Thus, for the past fifteen years, Los Angeles has been recreating and densifying its centre, while Shanghai has been trying to move several million people out of its bursting urban core. Their influence far exceeds their physical boundaries, as they encompass both the aspirations and the capabilities of the two great powers of the 21st century: the United States of America and the People's Republic of China. They are fighting for the title as 'champion city of the future'.