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China As We Once Were

The staggered skyline of Shanghai's Pudong district, across the Huangpu river from the old city center, is one of the most photographed urban vistas in the world. It has been a stage set for *Code 46*, *Ultraviolet*, *Mission Impossible III* and other films, imparting to each a dazzling, futuristic aura.

Pudong is not only the signature skyline of China's spectacular urban revolution; it is also a symbol of the urban revolution gripping nearly all the East. It is Asian ambition made visible, a steel and glass bar-graph of surging global power.

Part of the power of this spectacle is political. Between Pudong and old Shanghai across the river unfolds one of the great showdowns in world urban history—an architectural face-off between East and West, past and future, old and new. Along the bund, on the west bank of the Huangpu, stand the austere monuments of Shanghai's treaty-port past, when foreign trade and commerce was pressed upon an opium-addled Middle Kingdom. The West made China a second-class citizen in its own land, confining Shanghai's Chinese to a ghetto—literally “Chinatown” on old maps—within the old-walled city. The old buildings were a source of great pride to the foreigners. In the 1920s, expatriates would take twilight excursions to Pudong and revel at their glowing banks and trading houses across the water.

Today the Chinese do much the same thing, only from the opposite shore. Pudong's priapic towers literally overshadow the relics on the other shore, as if lifting a collective middle finger to the West. Americans, too, marvel at the sight, but read among the flood-lit towers a very different message. We see at Pudong what Europe once saw in us. A century ago Europe looked upon Chicago rising from the prairie, or New York erupting from the sea, with a keen mix of both awe and envy—with admiration, but also with a disquieting awareness of a tectonic shift in global power. Henry James, returning to America after a 20-year hiatus in Europe, understood that sense of impotence when he looked upon the “multitudinous

sky-scrapers standing up to the view ... like extravagant pins in a cushion already overplanted” that was lower Manhattan in 1904.¹ It is now we who feel, like James, the wind of the wing of history as it heads toward the rising sun. We have become the Old World. How extraordinary that only 60 years ago an educated American—in this case Nebraska Senator Kenneth Spicer Wherry—could look out at still-rural Pudong and exclaim to his hosts, “With God's help, we will lift Shanghai up and up, ever up, until it is just like Kansas City.”

The building boom that has rattled and reconfigured urban China in recent decades is one of the great epics of our time, and one that has special resonance for Americans. A century ago, the United States was the world's greatest builder of cities. Touring Europeans watched in awe as Chicago rose from the washboard Plains, burned to the ground and rose again, inventing the skyscraper along the way and toasting itself with the Columbian Exposition of 1893, still among the greatest fairs ever staged. Burnham, the event's chief planner, went on to carry his gospel of big civic beauty from Minneapolis to Manila; “Make no little plans,” he preached; “They have no magic to stir men's blood.” Americans hardly needed the encouragement. This was, after all, a nation Emerson once called “the country of the future ... of beginnings, of projects, of vast designs and expectations.”² We dug great canals, and strung up wires across the land for telegraph and telephone and electrical power. In New York, fabulous bridges leaped the East River, the longest ever built up to then. Beneath Boston and New York ran extraordinary new subterranean railroads, the first in the world. American cities were soon crowned with the tallest buildings on earth, linked together with track enough to stretch from the earth to the moon. The world looked to America as the youthful cauldron of things to come, the place where the urban future would be forged.

But even in that vaunted golden age of American urbanism—the 1930s—the seeds of

demise were already taking root. Henry Ford's magical new motor car, sent forth from its Highland Park rookery, was already swarming the land, urging us to scatter outward from our cities. Of course, it was not just the car that made the United States a suburban nation. Chicago and New York notwithstanding, Americans have nurtured an underlying ambivalence about big cities. John Adams worried about “those contagions of madness and folly, which are seen in countries where large numbers live in small places.”³ Thomas Jefferson argued that America should be a republic of farmers—for “the mobs of great cities,” he famously opined in *Notes on Virginia*, “add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body.”⁴ Anti-urbanist hankering for green landscapes and garden cities found a powerful ally in the motor car. For generations, Americans had little choice but to live compactly in towns and urban centers; now they could go where they wanted. Even our boldest urban dreams were tempered by an aversion to density. Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City was just that, and the celebrated Futurama exhibit at the 1939 New York World's Fair (underwritten by General Motors) envisioned a future of highways and sprawl that would soon come to pass in the post-war years.

In recent years, the beleaguered muse of urban futurism has departed for points East. And nowhere has she been more happily embraced than in the People's Republic. The Chinese have logged three full decades of urban construction on a scale the world has never seen before. Since the 1980s, the nation has erected more skyscrapers, shopping malls, hotels, housing estates, highways, bridges and tunnels, parks, playgrounds, squares, and plazas than any nation on earth—indeed, than all other nations combined. The speed and scale of China's urban revolution has been breathtaking. Right up to the economic downturn of 2008, China's construction industry employed as many people as the population of California. In Shanghai

between 1990 and 2004, more than 900 million square feet of commercial office space was added to the city—equivalent to 138 Pentagons or 334 Empire State Buildings. There was not a single modern skyscraper in the city in the late 1970s; today there are more than in all of New York. Nationwide, China erected nearly 100 billion square feet of housing between 1980 and 2004, almost half of the total American housing stock.

There is, nonetheless, a bewitching consonance between the American urban experience and the transfiguration of China's cities today. China's drive, energy and ambition—its hunger to be powerful and prosperous, a player on the global stage—is more than a little reminiscent of America in its youth. Americans gazed in wonder once at Futurama's miniature metropolises just as young Chinese today pore over spectacular models of the Shanghai- or Beijing-to-be. We dreamed, like Moses

King or Hugh Ferriss, of cities studded with airborne streets and impossible towers. Given wheels by Henry Ford, we sprawled across the landscape faster and further than any people in history, creating a new kind of semi-city in places like Dallas and Los Angeles. We cheered highways once, and even wrote poems to our bridges. But today, we are older and wiser, more responsible, more aware of the problems of planning for cars rather than human beings. A new emphasis on sustainability impels us to rethink the way we build.

But with wisdom has also come timidity. We are a suburban nation in tweedy middle age, no longer audacious builders who dazzle the world with projects of great scale and daring. We are cautious and conservative; our urbanism is retrospective, measured, and sane. We build new towns that look old and bury—like the Central Artery—the very icons of modernity we once celebrated. In America

today, the very notion of penning verse to a piece of infrastructure seems laughable. Just as it once crossed the Atlantic, the urbanism of ambition has crossed the Pacific. New York and Chicago were the workshops of yesterday's urban future; today those forges are in Shenzhen and Shanghai. In China we see traces of our youth, of what we once were—brash, young, reckless, hungry to make a new world.

Notes

1. Henry James, *The American Scene* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1907), pp. 76–77.
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Young American," *The Dial* 4 (1844): 492.
3. John Adams, "Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States," in Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams*, vol. 4 (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1856), pp. 587–88.
4. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, query 19, reprinted in Andrew A. Lipscomb, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 2 (Washington: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), p. 230.