BETTER CITY, BETTER KITSCH: MARKETING FAUX-MODERNITY IN CONTEMPORARY SHANGHAI

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ABSTRACT

"The debate about the relationship between social, political, economic, cultural and artistic modernity is still far from resolved" – Gabriele Bryant (Hvattum & Hermansen, 2004:68)

In the aftermath of Mao, and in transition to a socialist market-economy, Shanghai became a key site for the People's Republic of China to engage the world economy. Since the early 1990s, the city has aggressively pursued a new, global identity by assembling a collage of international projects, meant to symbolize modernity and to attract foreign investment. This article examines the ways in which Shanghai has attempted to re-brand itself as the state balances social plurality and a modernizing economy with its demand for absolute political power (Shambaugh, 2007:25). As a metaphor for the inherent conflicts that arise while running a city under socialist capitalism, the author introduces kitsch as a way to raise questions regarding cultural deception: How do symbols of international culture define, disrupt, or invert the logic of how kitsch becomes stylized? The article will explore the ways in which kitsch is both based upon, and vulnerable to, transnational flows of cultural aesthetics to support the argument that constructed modernity is always kitsch.

Key Words: Shanghai, modernity, propaganda, aesthetics, kitsch, urban

FULL PAPER

The re-emergence of Shanghai as China's foremost international city has come to be associated with its spectacular skyline (Gandelsonas, 2002: 38). Leading the economic powerhouse of China, government officials in Shanghai have negotiated between market-based politics and authoritarian governance by promoting public narratives. The image of a "new" Shanghai, projected through displays of technical innovation and economic prosperity, has been formulated to appeal to foreign investors. At the same time, these officials have promoted the city's cultural prosperity to placate the domestic tensions that threaten their political security. In addressing these and other expressions of state control, social identity and global marketing, I will employ the concept of kitsch to broadly identify deceptive signals in the experience and appearance of Shanghai's urban landscape. In the context of contemporary China, Shanghai kitsch plays multiple roles as an instrument of propaganda, a tool of commercial marketing, and a barometer of social perceptions and self-identity. Given that transnational influences today modify people's conceptions of Shanghai's culture, I will question how "official" flows

of ideology disrupt, enhance, or invert the logic of how kitsch becomes stylized within the city.

The term kitsch, as it originated in Germany, was used to describe the cheap, showy art that developed commercial popularity in late nineteenth-century Europe. Connoting bad taste and ranging from sentimental nostalgia to lowbrow eroticism, critics originally used the term kitsch to distinguish between the "high art" object and the counterfeit art-commodity. It is fitting that the word kitsch emerged on the heels of German idealist aesthetic theory, which related aesthetics to socio-political change (Hvattum & Hermansen, 2004:71). However, the "faux" essence of kitsch itself; that is, the reduction of cultural expression to a set of stylized aesthetics that mimic sophistication, provides a direct critique of the "aesthetic utopia" that German idealist philosophers imagined. Contemporary Romanian literary critic Matei CĐlinescu adopted kitsch as a critical lens within his broader discussion of modernity, expanding the meaning of "kitsch" to emphasize "a specifically aesthetic form of lying" (1987:228). Within this extended scope, CĐlinescu divides kitsch into the two categories of propaganda and entertainment. Despite these categories' differing agendas, he acknowledges that telling them apart is not always easy: "propaganda can masquerade as 'cultural' entertainment and, conversely, entertainment can be directed toward subtle manipulative goals" (1987:236). Giovanni Maciocco and Silvano Tagliabambe, Italian architects at the University of Sassari, adopt a similar, abstracted definition of kitsch. Maciocco and Tagliabambe posit "the landscape" as a "desired product," wherein kitsch serves as "an aesthetic category that well represents the contemporary city" (2009:31). When disguised as entertainment, they believe that kitsch can serve the role of social propaganda, as a distraction to "placate... anguish" during the turbulence of cultural transition (2009:33). The bland inoffensiveness of kitsch conceals potentially sinister circumstances of the urban environment. It substitutes harsh reality with whimsical ornamentation, inducing a kind of cultural "dreaminess" through the "aesthetics of deception and self-deception" (CĐlinescu, 1987:228). In the spirit of these more subtle, diffuse applications, kitsch becomes an expressive, usually aesthetic type of cultural deception. In the context of Shanghai, kitsch figures as a mechanism by which cultural associations and transnational symbols transmit expressions of status and identity. In the case of Shanghai, the central theme has been the association of the city with international modernity, and even futurity, and thus the suggested emergence of a new China.

Before beginning a discussion of the relationship between contemporary Shanghai and the rest of the world, a brief discussion of the city's recent history is important to provide some context. During the nineteenth century, following treaties that originated during the 1840s, the heart of Shanghai became populated by foreign settlements, called "concessions," which were established as international zones. The first influences of European architecture emerged from within the international atmosphere of the foreign settlements. Visible today in Shanghai's Bund district, these buildings from the late nineteenth century were transplantations, and paid no attention to the Chinese context. By the early twentieth century, however, some North American

architects, and several American-educated Chinese architects, including Lu Yanzhi and Yang Tingbao, had begun to blend local and foreign design vernaculars, forging new combinations of traditional and modern (McNeil, 2009:129). The vibrant economic and cultural conditions of this period abruptly halted, as war with Japan, followed by the rise of Communism in 1949, would put an end to Shanghai development. Nearly three decades later, Deng Xiaoping led the 1978 transition toward open foreign markets, and took the first steps toward new urban development. Shanghai became a focal point within a larger redevelopment strategy through the 1986 Urban Master Plan for Shanghai Municipality. Harvard University professor Peter Rowe writes that this plan called for "a socialist, modern city with openness to the world, incorporating multiple functions and advanced science and technology...as an attraction for international economic resources" (2011:47). The Pudong New Area plan was officially sanctioned in 1990 to become the nerve centre of Shanghai trade, high-tech industry and commercial activities (Rowe, 2011:48).

Shanghai Mayor Zhu Ronghi began to conceive of the new district through a trip to Paris. Possible explanations for this may have been his appreciation for the strong use of state power in French urban projects, as well as the quality of the historical French Concession, as Rowe suggests (2011:48). Impressed by the strict plan of the Paris business district La Défense, the Shanghai government entered a series of partnerships with French planning and design experts (Pridmore, 2008:21). Heading the main joint planning committee was Joseph Belmont, a major backer of the Parisian architecture initiative the Grands Projets that resulted in large-scale expressions of nationalism that were designed to symbolize the free eminence of French politics and society (Rowe, 2011:48). The dramatic presentation of Lujiazui, the financial center of Shanghai, with its broad, Parisian-style axial boulevard, suggests Belmont's guidance. In what may have been a publicity stunt, Shanghai's mayor invited high-profile, foreign designers for a "consultation," which attracted international attention, and by the mid-1990s a flood of real estate investors and developers were pouring into Pudong.

Figure 1: The Oriental Pearl Television Tower, Shanghai Modern Architectural Design Company (SMADC), 1995.

During this period one can see some of the first and most flamboyant examples of kitsch in contemporary Shanghai architecture. Mayor Zhu believed that the then-sluggish Shanghai needed architecture that was "new" and that would awaken the city (Pridmore, 2008:61). One of the first towers in Pudong was the Oriental Pearl Television Tower, designed by the Shanghai Modern Architectural Design Company during the early 1990s (Figure 1). Imagined to be futuristic, it has been most frequently described as "kitsch'" (Pridmore, 2008:21). In the continuing pursuit of the new, the boom of architecture in Pudong that followed conflated jolting with modern, quite directly. International architects submitted designs to competition juries for selection and later approval by developers. The outlandish, eye-catching designs of these competitions catered to the developers' taste for unique forms, as exemplified by the China Insurance Building. Overall, this period of development embodied contemporary Chinese architecture, as characterized by Tonji University Professor Li Xiangning: "Novelty, Monumentality, Bigness, Swiftness, Cheapness" (Hee, Boontharm & Viray, 2012: 9). The kitsch productions that resulted from the resulting attempts to create modernity were symptomatic of non-continuous cultural history. As I will develop later, this first spike in Shanghai kitsch was a cultural by-product of a sudden engagement with global markets that followed the city's extended

isolation and repression.

If emergence from isolation inspired Pudong's grand display of modern, the "new towns" that lie outside of Shanghai's urban core suggest a parallel transformation from introversion to mimesis. Bianca Bosker, a writer and senior editor at the Huffington Post, has brilliantly documented how these "simulacra-building projects" meticulously recreate the appearance of historic European villages, recasting them as middle- and upper-middle-class residential communities (Bosker, 2013: 38). Although other examples of these "architectural mimicry" towns are located across China, greater Shanghai is home to a high concentration of these residential developments, including Blue Cambridge, Canadian Maple Town, Holland Village, San Carlos, and Thames Town (Figure 2), among others (Bosker, 2013). As Bosker correctly notes, to dismiss these Disneyland-like developments as simply inauthentic or fake would be a simplistic evaluation. In addition to suggesting divergence between Western and Chinese attitudes regarding authenticity, Bosker argues that "the engineering of a flawless simulacrum represents an advance of culture above nature" (2013:24). Taking that logic further, such developments, it can be argued, represent an expression of Chinese supremacy, or dominance, over the Western cultures that they represent. This explains the perception of an anachronistic Dutch village as a "sophisticated" entity within modern Shanghai, with that sophistication derived from the symbolic presence of European wealth, culture and empire, and not from its physical presence, or formal design, per se. The resulting representation suggests a kind of sovereignty through subversion, analogous to the way in which the Roman Empire demonstrated the extent of its influence by parading captive animals from distant lands inside the Roman Colosseum. The use of these spaces by Chinese residents is complex, driven by both their desire to experience civility and upper-class society and a pride that arises through an appreciation of the development's technology and resources, especially its scale and precision.

Figure 2: Thames Town, Songjiang, a suburban district of Shanghai. (photo: 2006 Huai-Chun Hsu)

The appeal of these towns to the Shanghai resident is articulated through architecture as cultural self-deception, albeit with more profound implications than simply a "pleasurable escape from the drabness of quotidian life" (CÐlinescu, 1987:228). As social spaces, they are not kitsch in the narrow sense of being "cheap," lowbrow reproductions. As Bosker has shown, such dwellings, despite being faithful "copies" aesthetically, both inside and out, are also spatially programmed to suit modern Chinese society, for example, by providing adequate space for multiple generations to cohabit (2013:45). At the same time, the precise replication of a given history is largely superficial. The internal construction of these residences is stylistically modern and technologically advanced, incorporating features including "energy efficient facades, and other 'green' building practices" (2013:80).

Luciana Melchert Saguas Presas, a research associate at Wageningen University & Research Center (Wageningen UR), makes a distinction between "transnational buildings" and transnational influence. Transnational buildings, she writes, "are still 'global products' too often designed by the same global architects, and occupied by the same global economic agents" (2005:30). Transnational influence, by comparison, emerges only through local deformation, after global identity has been fractured and grafted onto local conditions. As opposed to generic global products, simulacrum towns are tailored to serve tastes and conceptions totally foreign to their origin, and thus have become transnational in their essense. According to Presas, the trend of postmodern architecture, with its aesthetic of individualized embellishment, was a reaction to the aesthetic homogeneity of these non-specific "global products" (Presas, 2005). Ironically, in its rush to be new, architecture in Pudong first emerged as postmodern eccentricity, before retreating to sleeker, more conservative forms. As Shanghai's citywide style matured somewhat, no doubt through consistent exposure to architects and design, a variety of more accepted flavours began replacing blatant pastiche. Because the kitsch aesthetic plays on misconception and cultural naiveté, progressive cultural exposure naturally leads to greater sensitivity to "crude" design. As awareness develops, kitsch adapts to accommodate sophistication. By deliberately cultivating a "global" urban landscape, Shanghai evolved from a few towers that symbolized "globalness" into a highly interconnected city, according to Xuefei Ren, a professor of urban studies. In her examination of intercity connections, Ren examined how Chinese cities were connected to the "global network" of architecture (2011:24). By tracking the location of branch offices of the largest architecture firms, she compared and ranked world cities based on how many other cities each was connected to through a common architectural firm. Shanghai ranked highest, and, as host to 24 international branch offices, it is "linked" in to 329 other cities around the world (Ren, 2011:30).

The zeal with which Shanghai administrative agencies worked to cultivate an image of modernity (embodied by Mayor Zhu's expressed desire for newness) is the critical ingredient that distinguishes the city's kitsch from generic homogeneity. Belief that one can conjure the "modern" as a commodity; that is, to mistake process for product, serves the very essence of kitsch logic. Twenty years after the Shanghai skyline began to take form, the city organized a massive world event to publicly

announce its arrival as a modern, global economy.

With the Shanghai skyline cluttered with modern symbolism, poised to create the future, the city hosted the "Better City, Better Life" campaign of Shanghai World Expo 2010.

The Administrators of World's Fairs and other global expositions have always oriented their content toward representations of the future. But the scale of Expo 2010, with an operating budget equivalent to $45 billion in United States currency, underscores its political significance. Nicholas Dynon, a doctoral candidate at Macquarie University, has suggested that the engineered space of the Expo 2010 heralded a new technique of projecting transcultural and transnational ideologies. "This powerful dimension of the Expo site reflects a broader evolution from the use of 'visual' to 'experiential' propaganda by the...Chinese state" (2011:190). In this way, Expo 2010 offers strong ideological and aesthetic parallels with the Chicago World's Fair of 1933 and its thematic representation of a "Century of Progress". The Chicago World's Fair was among the first large-scale attempts to integrate coloured lighting into architecture, and, as illuminated by "gas-filled tubes", was deemed "a festival of color," (Evans, 1933:21). Nearly 80 years later, the colourful lights and massive forms of Shanghai World Expo 2010 offered a similar kind of futurism. The Shanghai-sponsored Cultural Pavilion, hulking and elliptical, with its massive, elevated pedestrian passage, and huge, curving funnel-like forms, appeared to be consciously advanced, if not futuristic (Figure 3), employing a visual vocabulary akin to the work of Antonio Sant'Elia, the Italian Futurist architect (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Expo 2010: Pedestrian walkway. (photo: 2010 N.Zimmermann)

For an insightful perspective on the dynamic use of multi-coloured lighting, one can examine the seminal study of Las Vegas by the architects Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour and Denise Scott Brown. According to Venturi, Izenour and Scott Brown, the futuristic aesthetic of a lighting scheme follows from the dynamic qualities inherent in light, which can be increased in brightness, colour and velocity, as required, to indicate the pace of life as a display of technological prowess (Venturi, Brown & Izenour, 1977:116). Following from this, as Venturi, Izenour and Brown have shown, such lighting has been a popular component within the visual rhetoric of commerce and advertising (1977). In this way, Shanghai's lit buildings sometimes appear to be Western-style casinos. The Lupu Bridge is a striking example of this tendency, as the structure flaunts glittering lights that are reminiscent of the Las Vegas Strip. Apart from associations with advertising, the ability of light to distort spatial bearings can induce a surreal feeling of disorientation (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Time-lapse series of a tower with multi-coloured lighting (photo: 2010 N.Zimmermann)

The effect resembles the suspended nature of "hyper-reality" that Nicholas Perry, a sociologist at the University of Auckland, attributes to globalized culture. Perry, echoing the theories of Jean Baudrillard, finds a physical example of this kind of imaginary reality in Disneyland, which he calls "an imaginary place which feeds reality and reality energy into that 'endless unreal...immense script'" (Perry, 1998:70).

The surreal feeling that many engineered, immersive environments provoke, such as those encountered at expositions and theme parks may, in Shanghai, be an unintentional effect of the large scale and reach of its municipal urban feature (Figure 5). To someone unfamiliar with the

city, Shanghai's overpasses, highways and bridges collectively provoke a feeling of alien "hyper-reality," especially when illuminated.

Figure 5: Infrastructure: Underside of North-South Elevated Road, Shanghai (photo: 2010 N. Zimmermann)

Paradoxically, the source of Shanghai's expansive, immersive infrastructure is far removed from globalized culture, and actually represents a legacy of isolation. Shanghai's abundance of municipal and semi-private "design institutes" and the resulting civic infrastructural development that these institutes design and implement is the institutional aftermath of Communist era policies. During the Maoist period, the dismantling of design institutions and architecture schools nearly extinguished the job opportunities that skilled experts and designers had once relied on for work. Many Shanghai architects left China during this period, if their personal finances allowed it (Rowe, 2011:44). The subsequent transfer of commissions for the city's towers and other prominent buildings to international firms such as Kohn Pedersen Fox; Skidmore, Owings and Merrill; Nikken Sekkei; and Arte Charpentier; to name a few, while boosting Shanghai's international image also conceals the absence of a competitive native architectural culture. Today, there are many more native architects working in Shanghai. In a recent article, Peter Rowe and Harye Kan introduce a nascent "new stream" of Chinese architects who have been influenced by a transcultural, trans-Pacific exposure to travel, education, and distant designers (2011:13). Rowe and Kan take note of a few such architects working independently across China, including Wu Yue, of Shanghai, who founded the Design Future Studio after leaving a position as a key municipal planner in Pudong (2011:14). Rowe and Kan characterize the style of Wu's practice by his ability to work across multiple disciplines, including urban design and planning, landscape architecture and interior design, among others. As they point out, this degree of design flexibility is common within small Chinese offices, often, out of necessity, due to a lack of human resources (2011:14). Rowe and Kahn also cite the example of a small, multi-modal design firm known as MADA s.p.a.m., with s.p.a.m standing for "Strategy, Planning, Architecture, Media". Ma Qingyun, who

founded MADA in 1999, was born in Xi'an, and studied at Beijing and the University of Pennsylvania. Aside from the firm's flexibility in design across different media, MADA's work is notable for its cultural satire, "not at all ashamed to exploit high socialist camp in branding its identity" (Luna & Tsang, 2006:185). In designing MADA's Shanghai-based studio, Ma converted an abandoned "Red Star" kindergarten facility, a vestige of the public school system in pre-reform Shanghai, into a "unique type of socialist modern hybrid" (Luna & Tsang, 2006:195).

By and large, attempts to conjure the future at Expo 2010 and throughout Shanghai have fallen flat because the ethos of "futurism" relies upon a complex synthesis. Theorist Joshua La Bare claims that a connection to the past is what endows the futurist aesthetic with credibility. As he suggests, "the Japanese reverence for the past, may, in fact, be one of our main psychological reasons for projecting their 'futurity'...by entering the future present intact, by carrying with them 'the past' in the form of our present" (2000:43). This notion implies that city and state officials, in their rush to embrace modernity and futurism, have undermined their agenda by excluding local history. The political landscape is crucial in this scenario. During the past decade, there has been growing concern in China about the Westernization of design and its potential threat to traditional culture (McNeill, 2009:129). Although the fusion of Chinese and Western forms during the early twentieth century offers a history of hybrid modernism, Communist officials are unlikely to endorse a period such as the 1920s that was marked by free-market capitalism and a strong private sector. Rowe and Kan have called attention to recent historical conservation projects in China and Shanghai, but their historical thrust remains limited to a "recognition of industrial heritage of the Maoist era" (2011:13). Aside from the political undertones, the schism between modern and historic is reinforced by a rapid physical transformation of the landscape: more than 80% of post-1952 building construction has occurred since the mid-1980s (Rowe, 2011:74). Perhaps a tendency to over-simply narratives through kitsch symbolism reflects a necessary expediency for branding self-identity amid rapid transition.

Kitsch is not persuasive for describing the future; its flimsy outer skin betrays a hollow timeline. The difference between a modern society and its faux-modern representations becomes the historical scope and experience that remains absent from the latter. As Gabriele Bryant puts it, "being modern implies not just a distinction from the past, but also an open attitude towards the future" (Hvattum & Hermansen, 2004:69). Shanghai emerged from the Maoist period and its influences onto a global stage, and, determined to convince both the nation and the world of its modernity, assembled a range of global symbols and its own transnational copies. No matter how well concealed or integrated kitsch may become, it will always be evident under disciplinary forces that censor history to frame the present. As design becomes more established in academic and private-sector circles, defined and expressed through a diversity of democratic, participatory channels, incidents of experimentation and innovation are likely to increase. However, as the case of Shanghai illustrates, efforts by state and city governments to simulate such a vibrant culture will inevitably be undermined by the clichés of kitsch styling.

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