Historically, China has been culturally multivalent, with a heterogeneous range of cultures operating within the larger paradigm of the country as a whole. Today, this tension is best realised in the Chinese coastal metropolis, Shanghai, and the inland ‘northern capital,’ Beijing, two cities equally convinced of their centrality, with systems of spatial organisation that, in addition to being completely at odds with each other, ratify their own roles. In so doing, they offer two equally valid models for other Chinese cities (the so-called ‘second tier’ and ‘third tier’ cities) to follow.

Beijing and Shanghai are both consciously jockeying for this global city status within a China that, still in the midst of finding its own version of modernity, has not yet crystallised around a single urban space. A China in which all roads lead to state power is one, necessarily, which revolves around the Forbidden City (or its contemporary equivalent, the Zhongnanhai complex directly adjacent to it). The continuity with the previous imperial tradition is clear: one may say that the slight shift of absolute state power from the Forbidden City to Zhongnanhai, ‘signified only the changing of leaders, not a new concept of leadership,’ and a new concept of the distribution of power throughout space. Whatever the ambitions of the revolutionsaries of 1989, total power would still reside in the centre of Beijing, a city incessantly described by textbooks, propaganda organs and even tourism bureaus to be a cosmic diagram, an astounding and bizarre claim.

Clearly, this diagram is in the form of a gigantic altar surrounding a ‘gate of heavenly peace,’ (to literally translate Tiananmen,) designed primarily for the use of emperors, now claimed by their contemporary successors. This metaphor of a gate between heaven and earth still dictates the logic of the capital today: policy on high is translated into immediate political reality in Beijing. Beijing envisions itself as culturally central to China, a vision which itself defines culture as hierarchical, residing in closely guarded legacies of the imperial past in the Palace Museum, Forbidden City, etc. This vision, demanding even the subversion of language for its realisation, has no room for local dialects or ethnic difference, even representing China’s 56 ethnic groups with Han Chinese. This narrative crystallises around the political space of the centre of Beijing and its realisation requires its imposition and universal acceptance. This centre, however, is strangely deserted, echoing Anne Querrien’s concept of the capital: ‘The centre represents the political power by which it has subjugated its territory. This centre, spacially alive with the comings and goings of its representatives, is often apparently vacant… it is never the heart of metropolitan life.’

Beijing’s centre map, which in addition to subway stops, displays the symbolic heart of the city. Image courtesy beijingtraveltip.com.

Beijing, the political capital, is often given precedence in national discourses, controlled as those are by a centralising state based in Beijing, which has both explicitly and implicitly used media, concentration of academic and cultural institutions and language standardisation to posit Beijing as the true ‘centre’ of China. For Hung Wu, the spiritual centre of Beijing is Tiananmen Square. The urban design of Beijing—concentric ring roads—would seem to suggest that in a cultural sense, all of Beijing is suburb to the Forbidden City, an impression that is equally apparent on subway maps. Wu Hung writes that immediately after the 1949 revolution, the planner Chen Geng ‘identified the city’s traditional zero point… all other architectural features were subordinate to this absolute centre, while reinforcing it.’ In fact, not only Beijing but the entire country itself can be said, in the vision suggested by Beijing’s planners and officials, to be centred around Tiananmen, ‘a forestanding front [which] can thus have a large architectural complex—city or country—as its metaphorical body.’

Shanghai is another story altogether. It is a series of centres, having at least three zones in different areas understood by Shanghai residents as ‘downtown.’ To once more use Querrien’s terms, Shanghai ‘offers its own mode of space-time to those for whom the principles of a sovereign people and a nation state do not apply.’ Shanghai’s gaze, when not narcissistically directed at its own image, is directed at the world outside of China. Shanghaiese have no doubt about the privileged status of their city; if it doesn’t really rival Beijing in political terms, that’s because politics is Beijing’s game and Shanghai isn’t playing. Though Shanghai, almost by definition, has no centre like Tiananmen, the Oriental Pearl Tower is as indicative of Shanghai’s spatial practices as Tiananmen is to Beijing. As with Tiananmen, it is both

\[\text{Image 37x331 to 846x1058}\]
symbol and centre of the city, a monument that has real social meaning as an organizing principle. If the square materializes as a viewing tower itself. This triple function of spectacle – transmitting spectacle, enacting spectacle, and enabling spectacle – exemplifies the language of Shanghai’s skyline. ‘Much of the admiration for Shanghai is based on visual evidence. Just look at Shanghai’s impressive and imposing skyline and the conclusion is obvious,’14 writes an economist. Shanghai’s baroque frippery is not a coincidence but fundamental to the perception that it is the natural economic centre of China. Shanghaiese writers have noted the commercial character of the city; Wang Anyi writes of the Shanghai opera of the 1920s that ‘The singing resembled everyday conversation, and the subject was the bitterness of not having the necessities of life, such as rice and salt – far from cry from… Peking opera, consumed by lofty ideas such as loyalty and patriotism’.15

It is worth noting that the names of both cities denote their geographic positions. If Beijing defines itself as the capital of the north, Shanghai epitomises the culmination of a different way, and that of the water cities of the Yangtze valley. The city’s name situates it on the upper reaches of the Huanghai river. Ransiere recently wrote of the chaotic population of Port Lip, a disease that comes from the port, from the predominance of maritime enterprise governed entirely by profit and survival. Empirical politics, that is to say democracy, is identified with the maritime sovereignty of the lot for possession.’16 This feeling is still present in the streets of the old quarters of Shanghai, for example in large swathes of the Huangpu and Hongkou districts; places that truly seem designed for communal living, daily rituals of buying and selling, chatting and being in a street whose role is materialized between public and private. This is, of course, a democracy completely different from the one that elite students demonstrate in Tiananmen Square. The social fabric of the metropolis is a democracy in which citizens of various origins stand at an equal distance from each other… however, in the heart of the city, where the skyscrapers encourage a limitless economic expansion which completely overrides this ideal.17 Indeed, the social mobility that so often cast as a virtue, is often a mirage and a redemptorist fantasy. As Wang Anyi wrote of a building on Shanghai’s Bund, ‘It was designed to look down over everything, impressing viewers with an air of tyrannical power. Fortunately, behind these magnificent streets and alleys that led to the longdong houses, whose spirit was democratic.’ These same longdong are now being demolished for real estate development.18 According to Chevalier’s remarks about the same process in Paris:19

As for the futility, [they] were adapted to the imagined unreality… that is, their own unlookliness, which were used to and even appreciated.20

The hygiene problem of Shanghai is perhaps less the bacteria that might germinate than the ideas and men that may spring unsanctioned from the back streets of the city, the value of the city’s famous economic vitality is the independent spirit that so disturbs Beijing’s political vision. For this view does not privilege politics, nor the sacred spaces of Beijing, in the least; the capital of the province Down on Earth, where all distinctions of culture and tradition are valued at best as commodities to be sold. While this has indisputably given the city the kitchy veneer of a Fabergé egg, it has also helped, inadvertently, to dismantle ancient structures of domination, simply by carelessly falling to take account of them.

A recent book about Beijing, recounting the choice of the ill-starred OMA design for the CCTV tower, tells us ‘that the city with its spectacular and grandiose solution… was dictated by the explicit desire to compete with other metropolises, especially Beijing’s Chinese rivals of Shanghai and Guangzhou.’21 The fate of this tower may have convinced Beijing’s planners to leave the skyscrapers to the experts; as their own poupsoms claims to be the authentic source of Chinese culture literally exploded. As office workers set off fireworks in one of the buildings in the complex to celebrate Chinese New Year, the building caught fire; the CCTV tower that was to be the spectacular centrepiece rivaling Shanghai’s TV tower currently stood unoccupied. However; Beijing has its own monumentality, which is just as grand if not grander than Shanghai’s: the point being that two completely different power structures are being monumentalized. The two cities spatial organisation reveals two entirely different urban cultures and, at this point, it would be presumptuous to claim that Beijing is ‘the new Paris’, a dominant component in the competition for global city status. It is clear, however, that whichever city becomes the central space of the Chinese imagination will bring with it its cultural, economic, and social model, as well as the monuments of that model.

For all these worsened differences, the two cities are, though locked in competition, in some respects mirror images of each other. Those who take the budget flight from Shanghai-Hongkouo to the old Beijing airport – stepping from the Shanghai metro into the taxi into the taxi into the Beijing metro – may feel that they are somehow trapped inside the same labyrinthine form, one that contracts every year (as, for example, when the new high-speed train link is built, making the cities only five hours’ apart by land). While subtle differences remain – the accent of subway announcements, the greater humidity in the Shanghai calling streets ‘je’ instead of ‘gu’. The two cities’ spatial programmes are defined by their opposition to each other, this is precisely what makes them partners or twins. The truth is that the daily lives of the two cities resemble each other in a way that no other Chinese city can claim; they are worlds apart, but still unified by whatever mystical quality the Chinese government judges to be ‘first-tier’ about the two cities. These differences are significant, though Beijing representing a China subjected to state power, to urban planning that often disregards traditional neighbourhoods and to an ethnic nationalism which enforces an identity which may be subversive of the national project); Shanghai representing a China that is dominated by foreign investment, characterized by a fascination with consumerism and social progress, but which is perhaps compromised by a past and present relation to foreigners that seems uncomfortably colonial to many. The competition causes mutually felt tension and citizens of the two cities (Chinese and expatriate), locked into competition, stereotype each other mercilessly. For Beijingers, Shanghaiese are reputed, arrogant, obsessed with fashion, and lacking in culture; for Shanghai residents, Beijingers seems drab, overly polished, dirty, poorly planned and generally vulgar. The contrast between the two is crucial to China’s future – will it look like Shanghai, with its homogenizing, nationalist vision of a China where car parks, artists and offices alike come to the capital? To ask where the destiny of capital China will be is to ask whether the future of China will be dominated by the state or by non-state economic actors. Just as Beijing’s Olympics brought the formidable power of the state to bear, so Shanghai’s Expo – built on a different economic structure of coalition between the state, government, foreign investors and investment from state-owned enterprises – today reveals its own unique strengths. Both spectacles were primarily aimed at the domestic Chinese population, showing China its own cities, with have here taken on new forms, as much as it displaced itself to the outside world. The model that China is lurching towards is still uncertain and the clashes between the metropoli and the capital stage the internal divisions for the world.

Jacob Dreyer
London Consortium
jacobaugustudsgreyer@gmail.com

References

3. Mandarin, based on Beijing dialect, implies that Beijing is standard and Shanghai Guangzhou, Suzhou et al are superfi cial, more or less aberrations or ‘local’, perhaps reflecting tensions in the placement of Chinese culture that go back to the Three Kingdoms period.
5. Ibid. p. 8.
6. Ibid. p.53.
8. www.chinatour360.com/beijing/forbidden-city/ is one example; however, a google search for ‘Beijing cosmic diagram’ quickly turns up many results. In contrast, Shanghai cosmic diagram turns up nothing specifi c to the urban form.
9. The children supposedly representing the country’s 56 ethnic groups were in fact all in the same one, the majority Han Chinese race,” www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/othersports/olympics/2012/01/28/Shanghai-Olympic-Exhibition-Children-exposed-as-fake-in-opening-ceremony.html.
11. People’s Square, Lujiazui, Xujiahui, not to mention the French Concession, Jing’an Temple, Zhongshan Park, etc.
12. The metropolitan radar membrane that allows communication between two or more milieus, while the capital serves as a nucleus around which these milieus are rigorously organised.
18. Arkaraprasertkul, Non. 2010. ‘Debating Interdisciplinarily, Debating Shanghai Urban Housing’ Oxford University. (This is a conference paper). The 2010 CFP (China Postgraduate Network) conference held at Oxford University.
21. Arakaraprasertkul, Non. 2010. ‘Debating Interdisciplinarily, Debating Shanghai Urban Housing’ Oxford University. (This is a conference paper). The 2010 CFP (China Postgraduate Network) conference held at Oxford University.
27. The news of the times, China state would like to minimise that fact.