

**Book review: Yawei Chen 2007: *Shanghai Pudong: Urban Development in an Era of Global–Local Interaction*. Amsterdam: Delft University Press.**

Review by: [Susan M. Walcott](#)

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**Article:**

The 2008 Olympics brought world attention to the speed and assertiveness of China’s self-conscious projection of its modernity in the form of spectacular urban built projects. Before Beijing’s transformation, came Shanghai’s Pudong, following the earlier instant metropolis of the Pearl River Delta’s Shenzhen. Indeed, the two main questions dealt with in this book concern ‘the main factors responsible for the speed achieved by the Pudong development’ (p. 337) and the extent to which this phenomenon ‘reflect[ed] the characteristics of a developmental state’ (p. 337). Key explanations focus on the role of new networks leading to new forms of urban governance, along with the role of global and intellectual capital underlying the project and its contribution to shaping the form of the city. A basic question dealt with in this case study concerns whether the urban outcome of the avowedly developmental state’s drive can serve as a replicable or desirable model for other countries climbing the ladder of modernization. The assertion that China’s ascension poses an alternative to prevailing models based on earlier and largely Western-derived experience generates much attention — laying aside the example of Japan, which pioneered successful modernization transformation in Asia.

The author’s main arguments involve the role of the state in negotiating global and local forces to promote a consistently high but controlled and sustained increase in economic prosperity through investment in urban development. This is exemplified by the rise of Pudong from the rural Eastern side of the Huangpu River, across from the glamorous Shanghai (aka Puxi or ‘west of the Pu’). Four critical steps contributed to opening up the Chinese economy. The first allowed the local municipal government to have an effective voice in development policy. The author incorrectly calls it an ‘open door policy’, harking back to the era when a privilege granted to one foreign colonial power had to be extended to all others with territorial interests in China. In this case, Shanghai-Pudong acts as a Hong Kong-type experimental East–West interactive learning cauldron.

The second important feature responsible for Pudong’s rise lies at the core of the frequent phrase ‘with Chinese characteristics’: the intersecting and supportive major role played by both the national- and municipal-level governments. A third attribute was the attraction of top young talent to government, with new ideas concerning implementation of market-oriented (rather than the former top-down, Beijing-centric) political and legal frameworks. The final strategy involved carefully selecting the types of development promoted by government incentives, such as restricting permitted foreign investment to deprived areas in China, which would involve technology upgrades and long-term sustainable jobs, suitable for highly skilled as well as rural migrant workers. Deng Xiao-ping’s largely pragmatic approach to modernizing development prevailed to create a showcase in Pudong.

This book originated in the author’s dissertation focused on urban housing and planning, based on information available in 2004. As such, it provides several useful features promoting a methodological transparency not always available in the standard book format — an extensive (though not exhaustive) bibliography, copious

appendix materials, a condensed summary and an appropriately broad methodology (literature review, qualitative and quantitative data-gathering material). Maps, planning blueprints, pictorial contrasts and graphics enhance the presentation, such as the illustration of a traditional pagoda next to Jinmao Tower, the modern derivative design featured on the cover. This also acts as a good metaphor for the basic and important story of how lines were deliberately and fruitfully blurred between national and international designers, as well as municipal- and state-level bodies. The author does not flinch from narrating the relocation of residents from their demolished neighbourhoods — making way for new ‘highest and best use’ structures — to high-rise apartments with modern features. The author assumes that since the government is responsible for acting in the people’s best interest that is what was done; the degree of involvement by, or consultation with, the affected citizens is dealt with in greater depth elsewhere.

This study is taken mainly from the planner’s viewpoint. The price paid for adoption of zoned concentrations of similar developments, resulting in overly separated functional areas that have obliterated the organically created interaction of residents with services, retail and employment areas, led to a lack of ‘*renqi*’ (p. 280), or liveliness, that Western planners strive to recapture in ‘back-to-the-future’ or ‘Smart Growth’ integrated development.

This study’s best contribution comes from the detailed description of the chosen mechanisms and processes used for the transformation of greater Shanghai. Informed by the author’s previous experience with a municipal planning body in China, the construction of the political and legal framework for this mammoth undertaking is described, along with the ensuing construction of Pudong. Adaptation of public–private partnerships, build-to-own and other mechanisms familiar in more fully marketized economies need to be reconstrued in an evolving Chinese political economy.

A common shortcoming of case studies lies in their failure to acknowledge or assess the role played by timing in shaping the features and outcomes being examined. The case of Pudong shows both what can happen when local and global forces are both out of, and then in, sync — wide streets and open fields, set aside when China decided to develop, remained empty until financial markets deemed the time ripe to complete investments, followed by the over-building boom. To her credit, the author concludes by pointing out Pudong’s unique aspects as a designated model for China’s urban future (though downplaying its role as a regional balance to the Pearl River delta). The prowess of this particular developmental state to create a new urban form remains remarkable; this book offers one insider’s interesting contribution to how it was accomplished.