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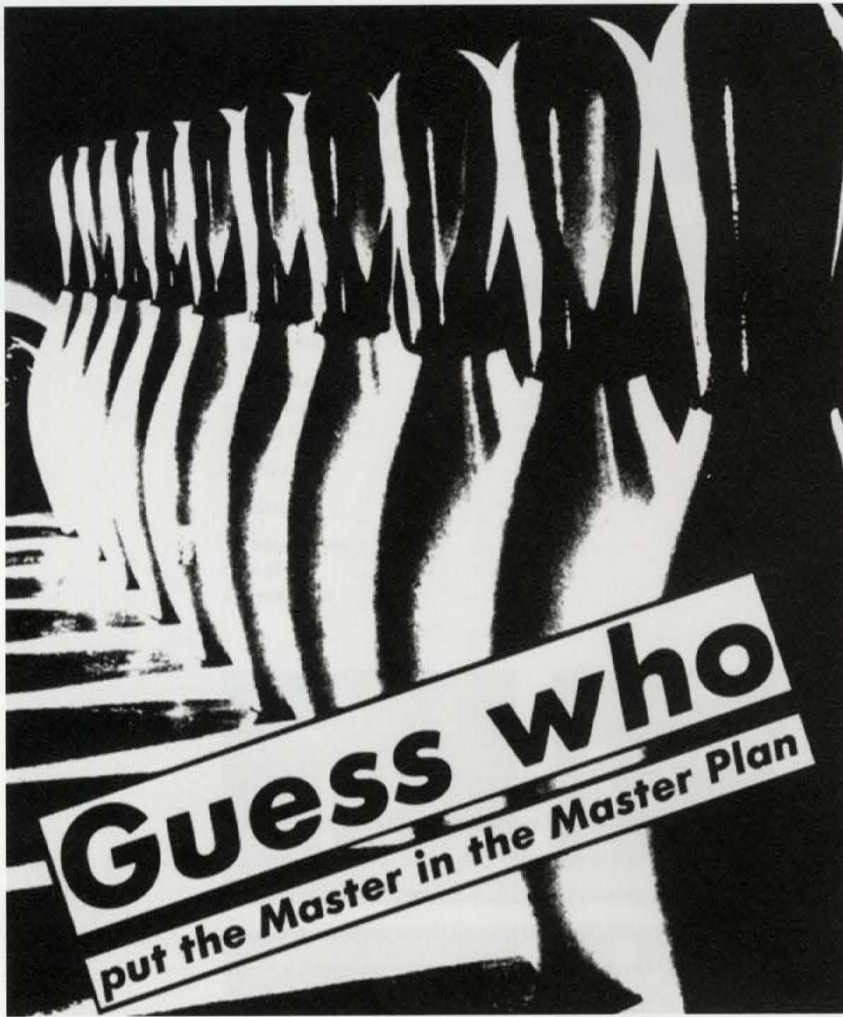
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CAPTAIN, CAPITALISM, COMMUNISM



Mastering the Master Plan In one of her textual images, Barbara Kruger states "Guess who put the Master in the Master Plan."¹ The statement is especially relevant in the case of China. Although leaders come and go, authority in this culture reigns supreme. The drive to master territory remains strong, irrespective of who is in charge and what ideologies are pursued. With the country's efforts to achieve market economy status well underway, something has indeed happened in China. And, the nation's change of course has obviously left its marks on the built environment, stamped as it is through and through by authority. The party-state, in a new capitalist guise, is master – the ultimate *Bauherr*.

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It is he who gives orders to the crew, he who holds the helm or sits at the controls: he is the headman, there at the head of the crew and the machine. And oftentimes, he is called the captain.

Jacques Derrida²

Text: Marc Angéil and Cary Siress

A sculpture by artist Sui Jianguo is telling of a shift in China's orientation. The work, *Legacy Mantle*, from 1997 depicts the famous jacket worn by Mao Zedong as a symbol of proletarian solidarity, a suit, by the way, also worn by generations of Chinese to show loyalty to the Communist Party. The suit is now empty. One is reminded of Hans Christian Andersen's tale *The Emperor's New Clothes*, only this time with the emperor himself invisible as if to suggest that "the void left by a vanished leader and his outdated system" is just waiting to be filled.³ It remains to be seen who or what will fill the void. Clearly, Sui Jianguo's piece has a critical edge, bearing as it does "on the hollowness of past political schemes."⁴ Yet, he has not been branded a dissident as have so many others. Quite the contrary, his work, whether intentional or not, serves two crowds at once, being embraced at home for elevating a vernacular item to iconic art form and likewise abroad by Western markets for its stinging commentary on China. Both sides seem to get what they want, even more so as hefty profits are made. Like so many other products, however, art made in China is cheap and fast due to enormous resources of both low-cost space and labor that make it pos-



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sible for such artists “to turn out signature works at a prolific rate.”⁵ Even the art scene is a venue where China wants to trump the world. Other editions of this sculpture are mass produced like plastic toys in bright candy colors, attracting a growing number of international collectors whose desire for Chinese art has reached a new frenzy as reflected in soaring prices of the Mao jacket.⁶ This newfound appeal for art from China in Western markets is mirrored at a more general level by China’s attraction to Western values, as reflected in the very fact that the party uniform as daily attire has gradually disappeared in the People’s Republic to be replaced by the Western business suit. Bear in mind that those worn in the West are more than likely made in Chinese sweatshops.

Undeniably, something has happened in China, and it is not limited to cultural trends alone. For more sweeping changes are underway, changes that have shaken the very political economy of a nation and left their mark on the organization of territory.

The sustained building surge has ushered in nothing short of an urban revolution that, above all, signals changing relations between the State and capital. Revolutions are no light matter in China, as we might recall from Chairman Mao’s quotation “a revolution is not a dinner party,” for “a revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence.”⁷ It is no different with the city. To all appearances, urbanization seems to have paved the way for the country’s market transition and ascent in the world community. Vast swaths of new development herald the advent of the latest lifestyle for throngs of aspir-

ing urbanites; nonstop stretches of fresh skyline clamber for cosmopolitan standing in the major league of cities; sheer quantity and height suffice as telltale measures of success in having mobilized the future in record time. By most accounts, cities ‘Made in China’ have served their role well as outward emblem of political and economic reform. They also serve to back up the claim that the People’s Republic means business in opening its borders to world trade. But, while such a wager might, at face value, spell out the symbolic importance of post-reform cities in China, it says little about their strategic entrepreneurial role in consolidating foreign investment on the mainland, and reinforcing party power both domestically and abroad. Why should it be otherwise? For in the heady game to outmaneuver all rivals in the race for the global jackpot, the rush to keep up appearances is key. What’s more, the city as pawn in this game would seem to be worth its weight in gold.

Urban Mise-en-scène

A point in case is Shanghai. Here, “Better City, Better Life” has become a veritable axiom equating urbanity with life improvement. Political dictum and advertising slogan merge into a rhetorical sound bite for the urban good life. The motive is clear: planning and real estate are part of a redirected urban revolution. The saying “Better City, Better Life” – used as theme of the Shanghai Expo 2010 – appears on countless brochures and web-pages, in political speeches and publicity campaigns. It also welcomes visitors to the Urban Planning

1 Barbara Kruger, *Guess who put the Master in the Master Plan*, 1989 (Assemblage, vol. 10, December 1989)

2 Sui Jianguo, *Legacy Mantle*, 1997, painted fiberglass sculpture (photograph taken from Richard Vine’s book *New China New Art*, 2008)

3 Epigram on the wall of the entrance rotunda of the Urban Planning Exhibition Hall, Shanghai (photos 3 + 4: Nicole Leuthold)

4 1:500 city model of existing and planned urban development in Shanghai

Exhibition Hall as chief motto for Shanghai's urban remake. A voluminous ovation to the development of a metropolis of approximately 20 million inhabitants, the Urban Planning Exhibition Hall elevates architecture and urban planning to the level of a suitably representative spectacle. A 600 square meter model at the scale 1:500 offers a survey of the Shanghai arena, and with it, a promotional lesson on how to see the future city. Presented as a prototype of urban development, buildings and infrastructure are juxtaposed in an accumulated intensity that hints at an invisible hand of control. The enormous stock of both built and yet to be erected structures demonstrates all the while that Shanghai has effectively swollen to a modern metropolis comprised of, among other building types, more than 3,000 skyscrapers.⁸ An air of positivism pervades in that the logic of big numbers seems adequate as *the* indicator of progress and success on the urban front.

Occupying a considerable portion of the exhibition, detailed documentation supplements the model on several floors of the so-called 'Master Plan Hall'. It is here that con-

cepts of the Urban Planning Institute, the official agency of city management, are presented in countless plans and statistics that just as well act as a badge for managerial competence with regard to the business of implementing the Plan. Given the task of producing representations of prospective development, a battalion of workers labors to produce future images of the city, affirming that Shanghai's grand aspirations cannot be divorced from those of the State. Specifically designed planning instruments, building laws, and zoning regulations are put in place to boost Shanghai's ascendancy as financial capital in the Asian market and beyond.⁹ "As the 'dragon head' of Chinese cities, Shanghai never pauses in its struggle to rebuild itself as a global city."¹⁰

Urban Capital

Who is the captain of this ship? And, where is it heading? Despite all philanthropic assertions made on behalf of national reform, it is obvious that the Master Plan is slave to capital, giving credence to Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's prophecy in *The Communist Manifesto* that the heavyartil-



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lery of capitalism "will batter down all Chinese walls."¹¹ The political authority and therefore legitimacy of the Plan is measured strictly according to economic performance. Indeed, in its salute to the free market economy, the Urban Exhibition Hall doubles as a trading floor for real estate. Projects are openly displayed to entice potential investors to shop for future rights to the city. Shanghai is the commodity exchanged. In an extended sense, the program of the exhibition is underwritten by legislative fiat to create surplus value with the city and to increase material holdings in the form of property and money, to extend the wealth-based influence of the State.

Capital, the real captain of this venture, steers the country toward a specific cape: to land assets in cities like Shanghai in order to finance China's quest for geopolitical superiority. Recall that the terms *capital*, *captain*, and *cape* share a line of descent, namely, the common root connoting the exclusive rank of the master, head, or capo.¹² In truth, commandeering the destiny of capital is at stake. And with only one rule governing the game, the Urban Exhibition Hall does its part to keep other ends at bay.

Property-led development and redevelopment are "underwritten by alliances between the public and private sector."¹³ Such partnerships are made possible by land leasing policies that transfer rights of land-use to the market, while the State maintains property ownership. Through re-zoning and infrastructural provisions, local government becomes entrepreneur in preparing the ground for more lucrative forms of urban investment. One such project is the Shanghai neigh-

borhood of Xintiandi. Here, multiple actors, from district authorities to those of the Shanghai municipality, negotiated contracts with the Shui On Group as developer of the venture. SOM was brought in as architects for the Master Plan along with a multinational consortium of design consultants, including the Boston-based firm Wood and Zapata as well as the Singapore office of Nikken Sekkei from Japan.

The Xintiandi-branded shopping district à la Faneuil Hall in Boston or Canary Wharf in San Francisco – merging preservation with multinational franchises – has become a model for urban restructuring. In fact, the formula has proven so successful that it has been replicated in many other Chinese cities. What is unique to China, however, is that this model is linked to a national cause. The bid to recreate the city grants added value to the exploits of planning by presenting them as par for the course of another leap forward, just as it services China's true agenda to successfully align the 'C' of Communism with that of Capitalism – a crossing that potentially raises their respective authority to the power of two.

The rise of 'Communist Capital' – or what amounts to a capitalist dictatorship – signals the passage to a new form of political economy that only promises to further consolidate State power over both politics and the economy. The question at present is how will the communist ethic affect the spirit of capitalism?¹⁴ By virtue of an unlikely hybrid, a coercive top-down bureaucracy is allied with the unfettered pursuit of profit. But said alliance between socialism and the free market comes at a price, namely preserving one-party

5 Chinese Monopoly Game, *Uncle Wang or Rich Thick Man*
(photo: Andrew Whiteside and Cary Siress)

6 Xintiandi, affluent car-free, eating, and entertainment district in Shanghai (photo: Ernani Barrientos)

7 "Living the American Dream," spread in *Newsweek* for an article on the urban good life in China, 2003

rule at all costs. Bottom line: capital is placed under central control; capital is made to serve the Party-State; capital is disciplined for a new destination. Thus, the enterprising effort to link Plan and market not only leaves its forceful mark on the lay of the land, but in doing so, also uses capitalism as a blueprint for re-building communism in the 21st century. The authoritarian sway of the State as the country's supreme regulator, financier, client, and proprietor is ensured.

This perhaps explains why the dictum "Better City, Better Life" sounds so imperative in tone. It can just as easily be read as a boldfaced order. While proclaiming what the world wants to hear, such rhetoric also spells out an unspoken policy of security for the State. For better city here means first and foremost a better, and extended, life for the Communist Party.

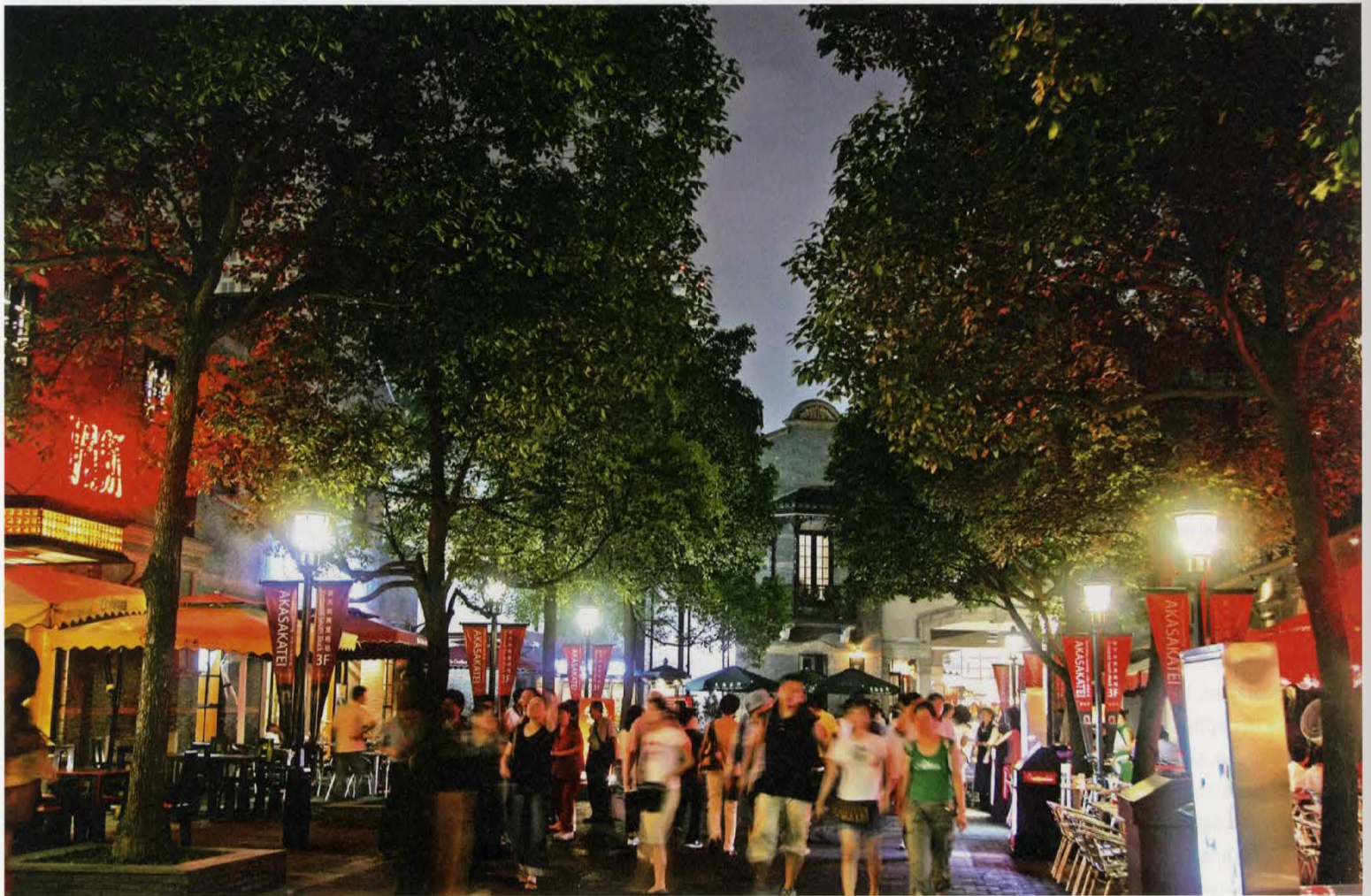
Urban Specter

Capital is without a doubt the master of China's Master Plan. Yet the merger of financial might with absolute power conversely draws a hard line between spatial innovation and social integration. The legislation put into effect to liberalize the economy toward a capitalist system of values has a double edge. On one hand, the State authorizes the oncoming

tide of globalization by streamlining the real estate industry for market expansion, whereby investment and growth become exclusive ends in themselves. On the other hand, the State maintains tight control over market behavior, making few, if any, provisions to assimilate a large majority of the population into the success story. And with not much official support to count on, the disadvantaged have little choice but to remain sidelined, especially when economic performance is rewarded with the same vigor as political dissidence is punished.

When it comes to China's relation to the West, the question of who is reflecting whom is raised. And it does not just pertain to the appropriation of investor-based models of planning, but to ask "Who whom?" – as Lenin notably inquired – primarily concerns political relations.¹⁵ Who goes to whom? Who summons and who answers? Who is imposing his will on whom?¹⁶ While bearing on agency, power, and interests, the question can also be narrowed down to daily practices by posing it in the setting of a planning office, a business deal, a real estate transaction, and so forth.

Facing a likely future with Chinese characteristics, all that has been appropriated from the West in the East now comes





Living the American Dream

back to haunt us as a specter, as our own refracted mirror image. Savvy business expertise, financial finesse, and political weight have now been consolidated in China to form a new empire. It would even look as if the West has been out-Wested. Given this newly landed power, city models à la *chinoise* are exported back to the world in a gambit to colonize the globe. It is already well known that cities in Africa are made in China. And, this may be only the beginning of a reversal of fortunes that sees the model-city scattered around the planet like some global exhibition of the country's might. As another spirit of entrepreneurialism assembles in the wings, one wonders what revolutions await capital when it too is re-made in China – tailored to fit party agenda. However, with one more glance in the mirror, perhaps we might learn from the communist past how capitalism could be re-socialized in the future to become more than merely an affair of private interests, and therefore make the distribution of wealth a truly communal imperative.

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- 1 Barbara Kruger, *Guess who put the Master in the Master Plan*, 1989. See Laurie Hawkinson, Barbara Kruger, Nicholas Quennell, Tim Smith-Miller, "Imperfect Utopia / Un-Occupied Territory," *Assemblage*, vol. 10, December 1989, pp. 19–45.
- 2 Jacques Derrida, *L'autre cap*, Paris 1991, p. 20. For the English translation see *The Other Heading*, translated by Pascale Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, Indiana 1991, p. 14.
- 3 Richard Vine, *New China New Art*, Munich 2008, p. 71.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 8f.
- 7 The full quote reads: "A revolution is not a dinner party or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another." Mao Tse Tung, *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, The Little Red Book*, originally published in 1964/1965, Peking 1972/San Francisco 1990, pp. 11f.
- 8 Christian Thiel, "Monopoly für 13 Millionen," in: *Hamburger Abendblatt*, October 30, 2000.
- 9 Zengji Fu, "The State, Capital, and Urban Restructuring in Post-reform Shanghai," in: John R. Logan (ed.), *The New Chinese City*, Oxford 2002, pp. 113ff.
- 10 Shenjing He/Fulong Wu, "Property-Led Redevelopment in Post-reform China: A Case Study of Xintiandi Redevelopment Project in Shanghai," in: *Journal of Urban Affairs*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2005, p. 6.
- 11 Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, New York 1963, p. 18. The actual quotation reads: "The cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls [...]."
- 12 *Op. cit.*, Jacques Derrida, *L'autre cap*, pp. 20f.
- 13 *Op. cit.*, Shenjing He/Fulong Wu, p. 2.
- 14 See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, An Essay on General Economy*, New York 1991, p. 123. See also Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons, New York 1958.
- 15 See Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, Princeton 2008, pp. 23f.
- 16 See Andrew Marr, *The Making of Modern Britain*, London 2009, p. 91.