



CITYSPACE by Christopher Choa

shanghai light

shine on, you crazy diamond

there is so much light pollution in Shanghai that Polaris, the brightest star in the sky, can rarely be seen. Recent clinical studies show that our body clocks and other internal functions are adversely affected by excessive light pollution. But there is hope: the city government plans to crack down on electric signs that shine into residential windows.

Good luck. Shanghai is in love with light, and it looks to stay that way. True, it wasn't always like this. Little more than a decade ago, a trip to a revolving restaurant for dinner bought you a 360-degree view of stubborn darkness. No more. Shanghai's surging electrical demand is estimated at 19 million kilowatts. The city's generation capacity, however, is only 11 million kw; in other words, the shortfall must be acquired from the surrounding power grid – and that's not easy. To compensate for the missing kilowatts, officials might consider pulling the plug on the city's insane variety of decorative lighting. Until that happens though, we might as well enjoy the show...

The Glow

Often it is not the light blasting from any one building that counts, it's the fabric of light from everything combined that's impressive. At night, the Bund has that quality, a glowing craggy cliff, best observed from the giant descending left turn off of the eastbound Yan'an elevated highway. More enigmatic is the sky itself; especially on humid nights, the most impressive luminescence doesn't come from the ground up, but from the sky down. Shanghai's big-sky canopy is a ten-megaton glow.

The Proviso

When Shanghai's most recent construction convulsion began, Shanghai planners and officials were keen on assembling a modern skyline ASAP. But at night, there wasn't much to show for all the work. So projects along major streets were required by urban planning reviews to incorporate night-lighting features. The earliest examples were straightforward – plain white fluorescent lights along the perimeter of every office floor. Displays later became more enthusiastic, incorporating an unlimited range of colors produced by varying the gas filling of fluorescent and neon tubes, and the coating inside the tubes, and even the tube material itself. Today all those elements are combined in programmable solid-state light emitting diodes. The city has become a pulsating, psychedelic organism. Just following the rules.

The Highway

The underbellies of Shanghai's massive elevated expressways are made even sleeker by ultra-blue, the color that future historians will undoubtedly associate with the first decade of the 21st century. In the meantime, you can imagine that you are zooming along in sequences from the film *Code 46*.

The NBA

Nobody really likes Pudong's schizophrenic, gold-faced, Aurora building. But let's admit the lighting is mesmerizing – a dense network of LEDs layered behind the glazing transforms the building into one of the world's largest jumbotrons. Last year, when the NBA's Houston Rockets and the Sacramento Kings played an exhibition game in Shanghai, there was some serious talk of broadcasting the images of some very tall people from Aurora's façade. Those with courtside seats on the Bund rejoiced. Sadly, it never happened.

The Permanent Dot

Red warning lamps mark the tip-top of high-rises' antennae, so that pilots can avoid the extreme outer envelope that could potentially snag a low-flying aircraft, perhaps an errant Airbus A380 super-jumbo. Some of these lamps are hard to reach and changing bulbs is difficult. So, many of these warning lamp assemblies are designed to last forever, or at least until its time to tear down the building. When one bulb wears out (after a few thousand hours), the next one rotates into position and takes over. Not unlike sharks' teeth. ■