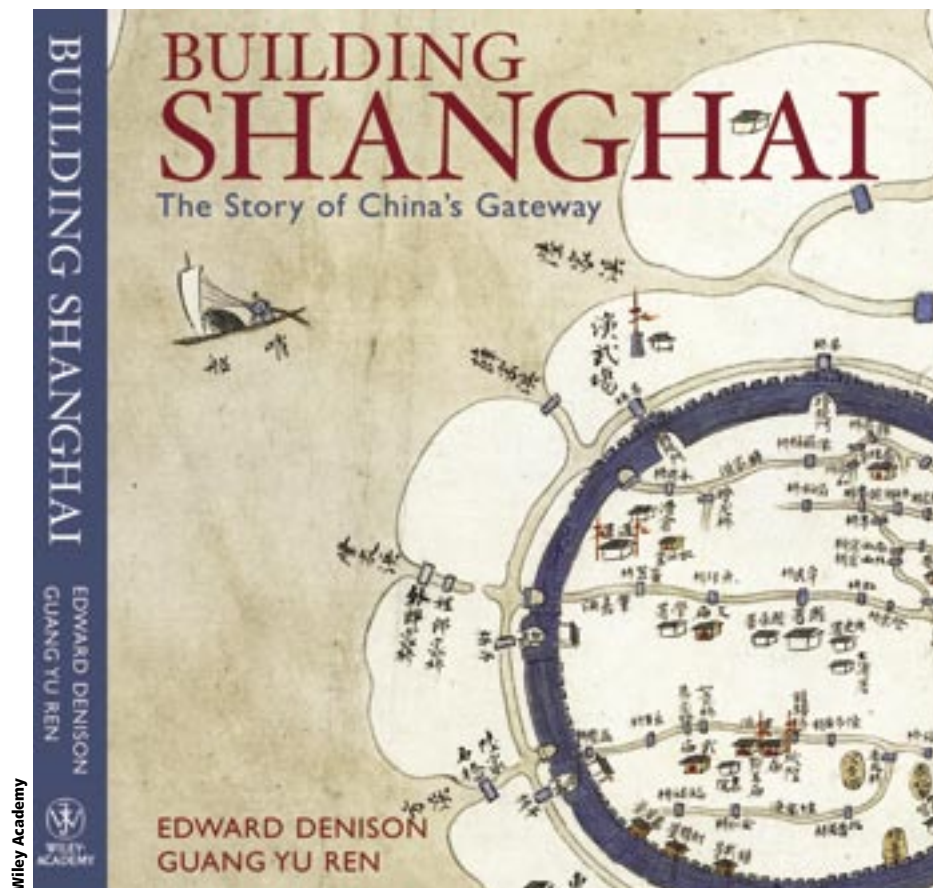


CITYSPACE by Christopher Choa

deconstructing shanghai

Edward Denison and Ren Guangyu's gateway to China



the city repeatedly in the past. During the boom years of late 1920 to 1934, land prices increased 1,000 per cent, and as a result huge swaths of often grand older buildings were demolished – “tragically torn down” was how it was characterized in some circles at the time.

“With one or two exceptions, the new buildings on Nanjing Road are appalling examples that show no vestiges of architecture and lack the picturesqueness of the old carved and gilded fronts of traditional buildings.”

Ironically, those very edifices constructed in the 1930s have been demolished, or are under threat of demolition, and the same sentiments – “tragically torn down” – are heard.

The theme of duality runs throughout *Building Shanghai*. Highs are followed closely by lows, talent exists side by side with hackwork, and politics lurks like a shadow behind the city's mercantile interests. And, of course, there's the dichotomy of East and West, ever poised in any uneasy balance, swaying to and fro at the whim of history.

Throughout the city's past, foreigners and locals often regarded each other with suspicion, sometimes descending into open contempt (a century ago, the terms “repugnant” and “pitiful” were employed by both parties to characterize each other's faults).

But, however uneasy relations were at times, there was nevertheless interdependence and cooperation between Chinese and foreigners, that ultimately produced a city whose landscape is both unique and, as Denison and Ren point out, “greater than the sum of its parts, an irrepressible and abstract entity”.

Shanghai is unique because so many aspects of human nature have been expressed in such a short, often violent, time. Through the lens of this new book and Shanghai's urban history, we can plainly see ourselves in context and maybe even catch a glimpse of what will become of us.

Note: The authors will appear at the Shanghai Literary Festival 2006. See Book Events, P94, for information. ■

Christopher Choa is an architect and principal of EDAA, (design, environments, economics, and planning) Contact the author at ChoaC@edaw.com.cn

/// The wonderful future of Shanghai that is painted in glowing colors by local scribes is merely a castle in the air, a mirage conjured up by publicity optimists that fades away before the cold light of everyday facts.”

The source of this quote is not last week's property investment newsletter. Nor was it lifted from the lunch conversation of an expat who has been in the city a little too long. Rather it appears in an ambitious new book by Edward Denison and Ren Guangyu and was written in the 1920s.

Building Shanghai: The Story of China's Gateway sets out to study the phenomenon of Shanghai's urbanism by placing it firmly in the context of social life and politics. Ultimately, it tries to make sense of the city, which has experienced every conceivable extreme – ambition, triumph, crisis and despair – by showing how today's issues and dispositions are not so very different from those of the past. The result is a

well-rounded document, sometimes a polemic, occasionally a rant.

As one would expect from such a comprehensive effort, the book starts by tracing some old ground, perhaps already known to readers and collectors of Shanghai urbanalia. However, the authors have provided fresh new context, linking familiar images to fascinating behind-the-scenes stories and negotiations.

As such, the combination of background information and illustrations makes this work far more evocative and relevant to modern readers than the prettified facades offered by most coffee table books on this subject. Indeed, *Building Shanghai* includes a number of cautionary tales concerning the vicissitudes of Shanghai's architectural history.

Could similar scenes occur in the aftermath of the current property bubble? Depends on which expert you ask.

In any case, the frenetic cyclical nature of the property market has spooked