

# Shanghai and Beijing: China's power symbols

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The post-1949 revolution China was about a ruthless enforcement of Chairman Mao Ze Tung's Communist ideology. It was the cultural revolution and the purge of the society of symbols of imperialist wealth. The post Den Xiaoping China boast quite the contrary, to a certain extent; it is about massive volumes and staggering numbers; tens of millions of cars of all brands choking roads and hundreds of millions of the 1.4 billion population pouring out on the roads and into the picnic resorts on a holiday. At the same time, tens of thousands of small, medium and large scale industrial concerns churning out millions of products. China today also stands out as the largest automobile market, where even the crisis-ridden world renowned brands such as GM are still registering profits in 34 provinces, four centrally administered regions (Beijing, Shanghai, Tienjin, and Chong Ging), five minority autonomous regions and two specially administered regions including Hong Kong.

A recent visit from the north to some part of the south yielded these observations, though not unexpected. It has been a journey of awe, amusement and admiration that the Chinese hard work has put on display all over; from farms to industrial parks and sports facilities, they all stand out as a tribute to the Chinese zeal for excellence.

And cities such as Beijing and Shanghai symbolize the might of this surging modern China, which every country has to put up with. These two mega-cities - with their combined population of at least 34 million, over eight million vehicles plying on the roads and some 200 universities - offer a scintillating narrative of physical development and intellectual progress of a nation that was once derided as the drug addicts and follower of a rigid socialist system.

The Communist Party of China (CPC) still rules China with an iron hand. It still maintains its hold on almost all the political and commercial business. Yet, pragmatism accompanies the iron grip, paving the way for a breath-taking public-private partnership that has catapulted both Beijing and Shanghai at par with cities such as London, New York and Hamburg. Name any multi-national or any business or industrial concern worth the name it boasts a representation in these cities. The road to their expansion as well as survival, it seems, lies through mega cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. But mind you, there are at least 16 other cities of more or less the same proportions across China, that work as magnets for foreign investors.

The 2008 Olympics proved to be a watershed for Beijing; the eight years that it got after winning the bid for holding this landmark event, witnessed infrastructure development and improvement of services at a breath-taking pace. Hundreds of new structures - from kiosks to super-skyscrapers to new fly-overs and expanded roads - emerged in the run-up to the Olympics, which shot China into a new spotlight. Through the meticulously planned games with world-standard facilities the Chinese demonstrated their knack also for management. The Stadium and

the colourful Water Bubble, the arena for all water events, stand out as a compliment to the creative and managerial skills of the Chinese.

Shanghai, the household name in Pakistan for decades for its silk and textiles, offers another parallel to Beijing; the expansion of the city east of River Yangtse in the last twenty years or so is simply stunning. Virtually nothing existed in the area except farm lands and bush when the city authorities decided to develop this part of Shanghai in the early 1990s. Today, a view from the 87th floor of the world's third tallest building – the International Financial Centre – reveals a jungle of concrete all around the River which serpents through the city. But the view from the 100th floor is even more stunning, placing the world under your feet; the glass tile floor opens up the view almost 492 metres down – vehicles and human beings moving as miniscule objects.

Currently, a new mega structure is under construction close to the Financial Centre – the Shanghai Centre. It is expected to surge into the sky as high as 632 metres with 127 floors by 2012, and will perhaps assuage the bruised egos of some Chinese who believe that the Financial Centre, designed and built by a Japanese architect for a Japanese company, took away the importance of the Chinese financial institutions whose offices are scattered all around in this commercial district of Shanghai. The Financial Centre now overlooks all these banks to the chagrin of many a Chinese. But they hope the new Shanghai Tower will outmeasure the Financial Centre as a Chinese symbol of Fung Shui – a place where energy is concentrated and from which energy flows.

Shanghai today stands out as a remarkable symbol of express development in modern China. That is why the Shanghains love to offer the following narrative to the visitors; if you want to know the 2,000 year history of China, go to Shian, the capital of ancient China, some 800 kilometres west of China. If you are interested in the last 1,000 years, go to Beijing. If you want to know modern China of the last 100 years, visit Shanghai. And if you want to see an example of Shanghai's transformation, visit Pu Dong (the areas east of River Yangtse). The entire region, used to be farmlands and bush in the late 1990s, presents a mind-boggling scenery of thousands of concrete blocks – from the few hundred old Chinese wooden houses to three storey peoples' revolution era housing settlements to the skyscrapers as high as the Financial Centre.

Unfortunately, though, the ever expanding industrial and commercial base of China is devouring most of the private and residential structures, which are being razed to ground for high-rise concrete buildings in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. While these mega cities exude the Chinese confidence and exhibit their capabilities, they also highlight the impact on the environment, which is reeling under ever-expanding concrete-steel-glass structures and a choking air because of the air pollution, not only because of the vehicular and industrial emissions but also because of the heavy reliance on coal-fired thermal power plants. The smog that hangs over most mega cities because of the power plant emissions may be a big minus for environmentally-conscious people but there are no power outages. No load-shedding, no water or food shortages. And this is what the central government has guaranteed.

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