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出版者	法政大学国際日本学研究所
journal or publication title	INTERNATIONAL JAPANESE STUDIES
volume	11
page range	61-84
year	2014-03-31
URL	<a href="http://doi.org/10.15002/00022462">http://doi.org/10.15002/00022462</a>

# The Crown of the East: The Centre of the New World in Shanghai

Aurélie NÉVOT

The word “China” is on everybody’s lips today. With the organization of international events such as the Olympic Games in Beijing (2008) and the Universal Exposition in Shanghai (2010), this new economic power has risen to take centre stage in world affairs while stirring up a series of stormy debates about its new role as hosting country. Even though misunderstandings subsist between “Chinese cosmo-ontology”<sup>1</sup> and Western representations of the world, at the same time points of convergence have been established which open the way for new forms of cultural expressions. Unfortunately, we hear little about this topic, and yet an anthropological approach might help analyse such a phenomenon, which is of crucial importance since it is the very basis of Chinese contemporary society.

Indeed, while China integrates Western values, it is creating a subtle shift between exogenous concepts and the re-appropriation of the latter — in dealing for the most part with so-called universal themes — with regard to its own symbolical system. To be more precise, it is new Confucianism<sup>2</sup> that prevails today in the country’s system of governance. This is based on the idea that Far Eastern values should be taken in consideration again in contemporary societies without however discrediting Western ones, in keeping with the circle of influence of globalisation. China has revised and exploited these values; it has reinterpreted its so-called “classical” school of thought — and the

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<sup>1</sup> To use François Cheng’s expression.

<sup>2</sup> *Xinruxue* 新儒学.

symbolism associated with it — in order to adapt itself to the present time and to conceive its contemporary society from an international perspective. In this way it anticipates the future, by taking over “old-fashioned things” that were condemned under Mao Zedong’s regime. Any kind of element referring to “ancient time” was indeed proscribed during the Cultural Revolution (1965-1969) — the effects of which lasted at least until the death of “the Great Helmsman” in 1976. The aim was then to make a clean break with the past. The historical events of the second half of the twentieth century in fact left a gaping cultural hole, a real stigma that Hu Jintao’s government, following on from Jiang Zemin’s, attempted to remove — and no doubt the new government under Xi Jinping will follow in his predecessors’ footsteps.

Due to this lack of logic in its own historical and cultural continuity, due to the total breakdown of its social structures that offended its national identity, Chinese society now regards its localities, objects, monuments, ancient artefacts and concepts as reflexive items that mirror its history and culture. It uses them to ensure the permanence of its symbolic order. It would seem important today to consider them afresh in order to bestow meaning on the historical and cultural continuity of the country that has been deeply affected since the nineteenth century by the arrival of Western settlers on the eastern side of the Empire (in Shanghai in particular). The Confucian State, conceived to ensure the Empire’s prosperity, stability and security, had been weakened since that period in time.

It is not so much the conservation of Chinese cultural heritage that prevails today as its *enhancement* and its *harmonization* with government ideology, a process which goes hand in hand with its transformation. China reinvents, redeems, rebuilds by grafting significations on the relevant items in line with State Orthodoxy. Through this patrimonial undertaking, time gaps are “filled in” and a new order is affirmed. This article sets out to analyse this semantic shift from an ancient set of symbols to a set of symbols that are re-examined using

the present as a yardstick.<sup>3</sup> The building commonly known as “The Crown of the East”<sup>4</sup> is representative of the “re-interpretative” ideology associating modernity and antiquity and more to the point, it encrypts the neo-Confucian vision of the contemporary world.

## 1. *General perspective*

This crown was built for the World Fair which took place in Shanghai from 1<sup>st</sup> May to 31<sup>st</sup> October 2010. It was then officially named “the Pavilion of the Chinese Nation”<sup>5</sup>. Built to last, it opened its doors on several occasions in 2011, after this grand “high mass”, until its final transformation in 2012 into the “China Art Palace”<sup>6</sup>. Inaugurated on the day of the 63<sup>rd</sup> birthday of the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2012, this “Palace” now hosts part of the collection of contemporary art previously housed in the Shanghai Art Museum,<sup>7</sup> and recounts the history and the evolution of modern art in China.

### *a. From guan to gong*

Henceforth, the Crown of the East is now explicitly associated with a “palace” / a “temple” (*gong* 宫) — the idea of “pavilion” or “museum” (*guan* 馆) having been semantically concealed —, but also with the notion of ancient China (*Zhonghua* 中华), more so than with geopolitical China (*Zhongguo* 中国). Special status is given to this building, implying — nominally — official recognition of its ideological role; it is indeed special but not explicitly so. In this paper,

<sup>3</sup> This article was written primarily for a conference held at Hosei University Research Center for International Japanese Studies. I would like to thank Professor Shin Abiko and Professor Wang Ming who invited me to present this work on 12<sup>th</sup> April 2012. I am also very grateful to the scholars who came to take part in the discussion. Thanks to the suggestions and comments made at the time, many topics have been studied further since then.

<sup>4</sup> *Donfang zhi guan* 东方之冠.

<sup>5</sup> *Zhongguo guojia guan* 中国国家馆.

<sup>6</sup> *Zhonghua yishu gong* 中华艺术宫.

<sup>7</sup> *Shanghai meishu guan* 上海美术馆.

we will try to throw light on this implicit ideology by focusing on the outward appearance of the edifice.

A plethora of superlatives might characterize this building: in 2010, it was the biggest and the most expensive building at the World Expo, and one of the tallest in the entire history of Universal exhibitions. Today, with 27 exhibition rooms covering 64,000 m<sup>2</sup>, the China Art Palace sets out to rival the most prominent museums in the world such as the Metropolitan Museum in New York or Le Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

The Crown of the East is, in fact, a somewhat intimidating structure. Of gigantic proportions, of a deep red colour and of a shape typical of traditional Chinese architecture, without being clearly definable, and impregnated with *high-tech* equipment and innovative technologies, this building leaves nobody indifferent, whatever their point of view may be on the subject. This impression is heightened by the fact that it stands out from the local town-planning which is characterized by futurist constructions. Hard to classify, *a priori* between tradition and ultra-modernity, this building incarnates the ideological orientation of contemporary China. And the meaning given to its architecture challenges all evidence as it implies a rereading of the ancient Chinese set of symbols. It evokes a "revised set of symbols", far from the clichés it circumvents so judiciously, thus opening the door to numerous interpretations. The Crown of the East could be compared to a highly sophisticated construction set that we intend to deconstruct here.

### ***b. Shanghai***

Just as the Chinese Pavilion is at the centre of our concerns, so is "cosmopolitan Shanghai". We will question the central place in China and in the world that is now being given to this city. It is no coincidence, of course, that it was chosen as a flagship city for the new millennium. Here China proved its worth to the whole world. Here the national community gathered for six months in this emblematic, fantasized city occupied by Westerners, and which was once the

financial centre of the Asia-Pacific rim at the turn of the twentieth century, but which is now representative of an “other China”. It is the most “foreign” of Chinese cities, where the nationalist consciousness and revolutionary leanings left their mark early on. Shanghai is now the economic capital of the country — which is on the point of becoming the first world power. It is therefore as an independent, rich metropolis preoccupied by universal themes such as urbanism and the environment, that the city “on the sea” (*shang hai* 上海) — and through it, the whole of China — flaunted itself in 2010.

### *c. Ecological and universal*

In keeping with the 2010 World Expo slogan: “better city, better life”,<sup>8</sup> each exhibiting country had to imagine *the* city of the future, deeply anchored in an ecological challenge of nature conservation and energy-giving auto-sufficiency. Although this challenge is not original, the link established between Man and his environment, as well as Man’s perception of his environment, needs to be questioned. Even though ecology now seems to be a universal preoccupation, it is not so for the perception of Nature.

During “Shanghai 2010”, China revealed how it perceives the “universal” and the link between humankind and the world by presenting its ancestral concepts for the whole world to see. Far from betraying its own culture in this international context, it has on the contrary given Shanghai special status: a haven where the centre of the new world, an expression that has to be understood here in the Chinese sense of the term which refers to its symbolism, to its cosmo-ontology, can be safeguarded through the Crown of the East. Indeed, symbolically, the “city on the sea” has been raised to the rank of “universal capital” thanks to the Chinese Pavilion.

In a forthcoming book written on this subject, the fundamental characteristics

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<sup>8</sup> *Chengshi rang shenghuo geng mei hao* 城市让生活更美好.

of the Crown of the East are analyzed:<sup>9</sup> firstly, facing southwards and associated with the sky, the construction is supported by four pillars standing on a building located under the Chinese Pavilion: the Chinese Provinces Pavilion which is symbolically associated with the Earth.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, its structure is made up of 56 corbels — each symbolizing a Chinese nationality<sup>11</sup> — whose forces mutually balance and ensure the stability of the whole monument. Furthermore, the platform situated at the top of the building recalls the ancient Bright Hall<sup>12</sup> through which the emperor had to travel to set the universe in order — what is more, the building makes reference to the unification of China by the first emperor with its seal scripts. Moving in time to the cycles of the cosmos — the 24 solar periods —, it also indicates the four cardinal points. Moreover, it is adorned with “Chinese Red”<sup>13</sup>, a “unified-compound” created especially for the Crown which diffuses, in a subliminal manner, the ideology of New Confucianism. Besides, the Crown of the East overlooks the garden named “Purity and Calm on the new nine continents<sup>14</sup>” — invoking mythical territories and the Chinese ecosystems. An exhibition ran from 2010 to 2011 inside the Crown. The theme was “Oriental prints” which evoked the industrial and economic growth of Chinese society, as well as its future ideological

<sup>9</sup> Whose title is the same as this paper's: *The Crown of the East. The Centre of the New World in Shanghai* (Paris, CNRS editions, 2014) (for the coming).

<sup>10</sup> *Diqu guan* 地区馆 or *Zhongguo shengqu lianhe guan* 中国省区联合馆.

<sup>11</sup> In the 1920s, Sun Yatsen introduced into the Chinese language an expression from the Japanese *minzoku* to designate the diverse populations of China: that is to say the word *minzu*, “nationality”. Thirty years later, after Mao Zedong’s accession, these nationalities were listed following an identification campaign organised in the 1950s: to each nationality there shall be a corresponding language, an economic level, a psychological nature, a common territory and a historical period, i.e. primitive, proslavery, feudal, capitalist and the socialist level. As this classification was drawn up, the word “nationality” does not carry the meaning given to the expression “ethnic group”. On the contrary, one nationality groups together different ethnic groups (“branches” in the Chinese vocabulary). Since that particular period in history, China has recognized 56 nationalities, the Han being the largest.

<sup>12</sup> *Mingtang* 明堂.

<sup>13</sup> *Zhongguo hong* 中国红.

<sup>14</sup> *Xin jiuzhou qing an* 新九洲清晏.

orientations. This exhibition showed the basis of Chinese utopia by presenting a revisited memory which questions head-on the evocation of history in China and the strategy of handing down a political message. The Crown of the East is said to “incarnate” (*tixian* 体现) a “project” (*sheji* 设计) which is the pinnacle of Chinese perceptions.

Of course, it would be impossible here to refer to all the facets of this extraordinary construction. Therefore let us focus on two essential characteristics of the building: its architectural structure and its colour, since both reflect the principal concepts inscribed into the building.

## ***2. Oriental Orientalism: architectural structure***

Let us first take a close look at the architecture of the Crown of the East. The edifice is said to be rather “strange” though the picture it conjures in people’s minds clearly pertains to Chinese classical culture. And although only one form is perceptible, different interpretations come to mind. That is what He Jingtang, its principal designer-builder, hoped to achieve: the Crown of the East had to be enigmatic. After long, sometimes gruelling brainstorming sessions, it was decided that “cultural symbols” had to be incorporated in the design of the Chinese Pavilion. It is up to the observer to perceive what takes shape behind this mass of red metal.

### ***a. A new Orientalism***

Although the building was defined as a *guan* 馆 for two years (2010-2011), that is a “palace”, “pavilion” (thereupon *guan* is pronounced in the third tone), it is also associated with a graph: 冠 *guan*, in the first tone, which means “hat”, “headdress”. This word is also used to refer to the crest of a cock or the top of tree. *Guan* 冠 can also be pronounced in the fourth tone and thus means “the first”. Depending on whether one pronunciation or another is chosen, the expression *donfang zhi guan* 东方之冠 varies: it can read either “The Crown of



the East” or “The East the first/the leader”. Is it implicitly suggested that the Orient dominates the world through China? Is China portraying itself *via* this crown-edifice while taking into consideration no longer only itself but also the Occident? Is this country about to decentre its cartography in order to fall within an international approach and to demonstrate its supremacy (and therefore express its nationalism)?

The idea channelled by China during the World Expo was to make the Orient a “visual angle”: *yi dongfang wei shi jiao* 以东方为视角. In other words, it was made perfectly clear that the international community should view the world from the East. This new perspective was put to the World – to Westerners – in which the Orient would predominate. Westerners had to see the world from an oriental perspective and express this point of view while taking into account the Western orientation: if that was not the case, why use the term “East”? A new form of Orientalism has therefore been established: the world is no longer seen from the Occident but from the Orient. “Like Expo’ 70 in Osaka, Japan’s first World Fair, Shanghai Expo staged a reverse or ‘oriental’ version of the World Exhibition. Both events promoted nationalism amid international and technological shows at a time when the respective countries were rising in regional and global terms” (Liang, 2011: 8)<sup>15</sup>.

We are witnessing a self-objectification of China. Dru C. Gladney has used the expression *oriental orientalism* to evoke the representation of minorities and the majority in Chinese art, literature and media which, according to her, parallels the portrayals of the East by Western orientalists (2004: 53).<sup>16</sup> We are also observing an “objectification of the minority other and majority self in China” (*ibid.*) At international level, it is also important to analyse this orientalization of the discourse; the expression “oriental orientalism” is also heuristically

<sup>15</sup> Liang, S. 2011. “The Expo Garden and Heteretopia: Staging Shanghai between Postcolonial and (Inter)national Global Power”, *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan focus* (<http://japanfocus.org/-Samuel-Liang/3602>).

<sup>16</sup> Gladney, D. C. 2004. *Dislocating China. Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

fecund to express what is happening on this scale. On this subject, Aihwa Ong uses another expression, which is also very interesting: *self-orientalism*. And in particular she writes: “Indeed, in a world of Western hegemony, Asian voices are unavoidably inflected by orientalist essentialisms that infiltrate all kinds of public exchanges about culture. I use the term *self-orientalism* in recognition of such predicaments, but also in recognition of the agency to maneuver and manipulate meanings within different power domains. Statements about Chinese modernity are an amalgam of indigenous ideas, Western concepts, and self-orientalized representations by Asian leaders” (1999: 81).<sup>17</sup> This idea was explicitly formulated in Shanghai in 2010. During the World Expo, the East was at the centre of a large advertising campaign, this direction being the Rising Sun and thus renewal. Associated with spring, the East is fast and powerful. It is a new era that was celebrated where the Orient appears first through the national pavilion which is clothed in a revisited Oriental Red as we will see, but also through the city of Shanghai, the old “Oriental pearl” (*dongfang mingzhu*, 东方明珠) formerly named “Paris of the Orient” (*dongfang de bali*, 东方的巴黎), or even, if we adopt other perspectives: Chicago or New York of the Orient. Shanghai is in fact the most oriental of Chinese cities.

Moreover, in 2010 all the national pavilions were located to the East of the River Huangpu — a territory named Pudong 浦东, “the east side”, because it is on the eastern side of this waterway. As a sparsely populated area at that time, it was in pragmatic terms the ideal place for geographically expanding the city. Historically, this territory housed depots for colonial powers in the nineteenth century. To reinvest it on the occasion of the World Expo proved to be significantly meaningful. And to have the Chinese pavilion anchored at its very centre was all the more so. By positioning its national palace on this fringe far eastwards, China is imposing a new perspective. It has fully re-appropriated a territory that was despoiled long ago; it looks towards the East and turns its

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<sup>17</sup> Ong, A. 1999. *Flexible citizenship. The cultural logics of transnationality*. Durham, Duke University Press.

back on the Occident. To be more precise, it focuses its attention on the opposite direction — we might say on itself, if we take the Western point of view. And to look out in this direction, at Shanghai, the country's financial capital that was ruined in the nineteenth century by the Opium wars and by the occupation of its territory by Western settlers is a symbol in itself: a symbol of renewal. China demonstrates an exacerbated form of nationalism and attributes a new role to the city of Shanghai, now the centre of political concerns. The city that was badly loved by the Maoist regime has become the well-loved city under Hu Jintao's government.

*b. Inscription of the “double universal”*

The Crown of the East inscribes two “universes” in its structure: the first is conceived at the base of the building; it is explicitly associated with the sky and overlooks the earth (the pavilion of the Chinese provinces). The second refers to the roof of the Crown, also associated (symbolically) with the Earth, in relation to the (actual) Sky. Let us attempt to explain this double articulation of the “universal”.

The Crown of the East is said to have the form of a *ding* 鼎, an ancient, four-legged, ritual vessel.

We notably read about the shape of the Crown which refers to the unity of the

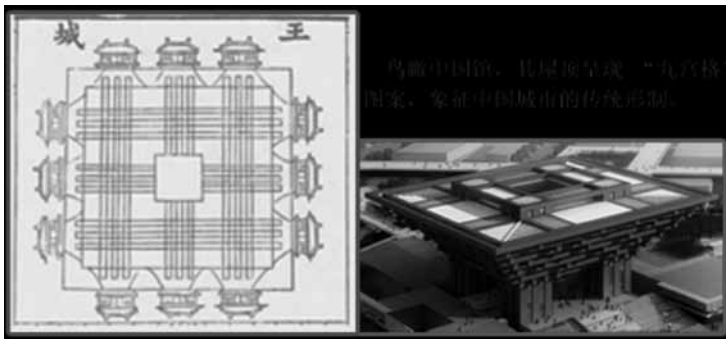


(<http://cp.expo2010.cn/BuildEast.html>)

sky and the earth (*tiandi he yi* 天地合一), echoing both the relation *shangxia* 上下, superior and inferior, and the Harmony of the cosmos — the correct positioning of the earth and the sky being indispensable for the proper running of the universe in classical Chinese thought.

In fact, the architecture of the Crown of the East also refers to the five fundamental “shangxia” relationships which were the foundations of Chinese society in the pre-1911 period: sovereign-subject, father-son, husband-wife, master-disciple, elder-younger.

Let us come back to the tripod *ding*. In ancient times, this kind of ritual vessel contained offerings and sacrifices, especially those given to ancestors. It enabled information about a lineage to be conveyed to the latter in the form of messages engraved on the inside of the container. It later became a symbol of power. This relationship between politics and religion, material and spiritual, visible and invisible is illustrated by the materials used: bronze, *tong* 銅. In fact, this kind of cauldron was associated with alchemy. *Tong*, which is an alloy, refers to a combination, an alliance which is a source of harmony — while the first radical of the graph: 金 means metal, the second radical 同 evokes “sameness”, “unicity”, “unity”, “harmony”. In a word, the architecture of the Crown of the East, shaped like a cultural vase, according to ancient times refers to the cosmos, to the alchemic process, to political power and to the relationship between Man



and his ancestors. Let us delve further into this analysis.

The top of the Crown — covering about 19,600 m<sup>2</sup> — refers explicitly to a nine-square grid: the nine palaces grid (*jiu gong ge* 九宫格).

This system, shaped like the Chinese graph “well” (*jing* 井), is thought to date back to the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BC). “It had the broader meaning of ‘to put in order’, or ‘to rule’, and came to be applied to the canonical texts that provided order in the world. Thus, the imposition of a grid first appears as the spatial form of the making distinctions that was the basis of all order” (Lewis, 2006: 248.)<sup>18</sup>

Now, such a structure refers to the symbolic space that is created so that the Emperor, at any time and in any season, may illuminate the provinces of his empire with his presence. This Bright Hall, *mingtang* 明堂, is an image of the world; it represents the whole country, *guo*, 国, made up of nine provinces.

4	9	2
3	5	7
8	1	6

In ancient China, a capital was only worthy of this name if it possessed a *mingtang* which constitutes a prerogative and the mark of firmly established power. We will see that the purple colour of the Imperial palace of Beijing went (deliberately?) unmentioned by the designer of the colour for the edifice, Song Jianming. This purple refers to the polar star and thus to the emperor located at the centre of the constellation from the Capital of the North (Beijing). The Chinese Red has therefore imposed a new positioning in the universe; the centre of the world is Shanghai, because it is where the *mingtang* is now located.

In this ancient Bright Hall that the emperor had to wander through to

<sup>18</sup> Lewis, M. E. 2006. *The Construction of Space in Early China*. New York: State University of New York Press (SUNY series in Chinese philosophy and culture).

set the universe in order, *Zhongguo* 中国 is a territory located at the centre (corresponding to the number 5 on the previous diagram), the place of the imperial power. In Chinese, *Zhongguo* 中国 designates China on a geopolitical scale, that is to say the entire country – which is considered to stand at the centre of the universe. Hence the expression: “*Zhongguo guojia guan* 中国国家管” should not be understood as referring only to the idea of “the Chinese national pavilion”. *Zhongguo guan* or *zhongguo guojia guan* means literally the “national pavilion of the country of the centre”. And if some people may be surprised that the top of the Crown is square shaped yet associated with the earth, whilst the pavilion is said to be associated with the sky, it may not be a contradiction or a representation of an “upside down world” but the expression of a totally new orientation which includes two kinds of “universal”.

In the first universal setting (which is based on the architectural arrangement of the pavilion of the Chinese provinces and that of the Chinese national pavilion), it is the order of China that prevails (in its own cosmological and national universe). In the second universal setting (which refers to the top of the Crown, to the nine-square grid, to the *mingtang* and to the “real” sky), it is about the order of the world seen from China in the universal capital that Shanghai has now become (a city which for the first time houses, on the Expo site, the “country of the centre of the universe”, *Zhongguo*). The world is thus re-oriented from the city on the sea. *Oriental Orientalism* takes root here.

In other words, the designers integrated in the same structure the complex issue of the double articulation of two forms of universal while preserving the idea of *tianxia* 天下, “under the sky”, which refers to the idea of a unified country, at the centre of the universe. Not only does everything located on Chinese territory (the “inner country”, *neiguo* 内国) have to be integrated in the *tianxia*, but the whole world also has to be placed under the sky.

Sino-centrism is latent and obvious. The main concern here is not to enable everybody to understand this symbolism, as suggested by the architect He Jingtang himself, but to make this national pavilion politically and economically

effective. This edifice lends a new orientation to China from a universal perspective. The “universal” is not presented through the prism of architectural curves or by the construction of spherical edifices, as is usually the case; China imposes something brand new. More than merely referring to the planet, the “universe” is portrayed horizontally, by referring to the sky positioned above the earth in the Chinese tradition. And the double universal anchorage (cosmological and international) is integrated in the structure of the Crown whose logo looks like the graph *hua* 華.

Let us remember that Hua is an ancient expression used to refer to China by



Photographs A. Névoz (09/28/2011)

evoking the ancient Chinese people, Huaxia, 华夏 – ancestors of the so-called Hans. Today the latter are still called the Hua people, Huaren (華人), whose sovereign is said to have been Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor, a civilizing man in antiquity. The universal, in its cosmological and international duplicity, is then also portrayed –and more importantly – in relation to the Hua.

Let us now focus on the red colour of the Crown of the East, a colour which



2012 logo

fully contributes to ensuring the edifice's harmony with the double universal.

### 3. “Seeking Harmony with Differences”:<sup>19</sup> the Chinese Red (*Zhongguo hong* 中国红)

This unique and composite colour is examined with regard to the fact that it is based on different shades of red (*yi zu hong* 一组红). The Chinese Red incarnates symbolically the Confucian maxim: “Seeking Harmony with differences”, *he er butong* 和而不同. This is evidenced by analysing the making of this colour.

During brainstorming sessions, it was first suggested covering the edifice in bright red, the same as the one on the cigarette package of the famous Shanghai cigarettes *Zhonghua* (*Zhonghua pai xiang yan* 中华牌香烟). This reference, which may appear to miss the point, is nevertheless not merely an anecdote regarding the history of these cigarettes which started at the birth of New China, *xin zhongguo* 新中国, at the beginning of the 1950s. Regarded as the fruit of national efforts, it is one of the symbols of the Chinese nation and of its influence (it was exported early on). Hence this marque of cigarette refers to the communist red (Red East, *dongfang hong* 东方红, which is moreover the title of a famous song from the cultural revolution, to the glory of Mao Zedong). And yet, Song Jianming, in charge of finding the appropriate colour for the Chinese Pavilion, immediately pushed this idea aside. Although the East and red were once again associated in 2010 through the Chinese Pavilion (Song was indeed looking for a “Chinese Red” to cover the Crown of the East), the social context was nevertheless totally different given the globalisation process and the re-emergence of Confucian ideology. The Chinese Red on show to the whole world in 2010 could not be compared to the red of the 1950 Chinese liberation movement. It had to be associated with the Chinese nation in an international context, as well as with a new Orientalism, which was analysed above. Judged unstable and labile, the Red East with its communist referent was no longer a

<sup>19</sup> *He er bu tong* 和而不同. Literally, “Harmonious but different”.



place of honour, contrary to the Chinese Red which was thought to be fixed and referred to imperial reds. It is in renewing with its past that China looks to the future.

### *a. Imperial inspiration*

During other brainstorming sessions, it was decided to use the red colour of the “ancient imperial Palace” *gugong hong* 故宫红. Built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Yongle, the third emperor in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), whose last emperor lived until 1911, this palace is located in the capital of the North, *Beijing* 北京, where central power is still seated. The imperial palace, as Song Jianming pointed out, is made up of a great variety of reds.<sup>20</sup> These reds provoked a “revelation” in him.<sup>21</sup> The expert shared his feelings on observing the colours of the *gugong* in Beijing: “Couldn’t I find here [in the ancient palace] a composite red<sup>22</sup> in order to create a global form?”<sup>23</sup> According to him, it was the only path to take.

It is worthwhile noting here that the expert does not refer to the colour *zi* 紫 which is specific to the place — especially to the walls —, and which gives its name to the forbidden city which is more commonly called the old/former palace by locals. Indeed, in Chinese, the full name of what is referred to as the “forbidden city” is “the forbidden purple city”,<sup>24</sup> in reference to the star in Chinese astronomy: the “tiny purple star”.<sup>25</sup> This is the polar star, the celestial symbol of the emperor — son of the sky — because it is located at the centre of the rotation of the firmament, the emperor seated at the centre of the empire. The Forbidden City locks away on earth the individual who regulates the universe and holds the Celestial Mandate: the Emperor is named by reference

<sup>20</sup> *Gugong ta shi yi dapi yi zuhong*, 故宫它是一大批一组红。

<sup>21</sup> *Gugong de hong gei wo yi ge qishi* 故宫的红给我一个启示。

<sup>22</sup> *Yizuhong* 一组红。

<sup>23</sup> *Zucheng yi ge zhengti xingxiang* 组成一个整体形象。

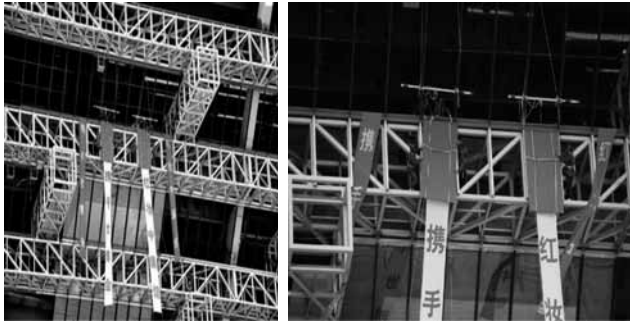
<sup>24</sup> *Zijincheng* 紫禁城。

<sup>25</sup> *Ziweixing* 紫微星。

to the celestial alter ego of the one who reigns on earth. By never using the word “purple” (*zi* 紫), Song has imposed a form of decentralisation. It is no longer a question of imperial and cosmological organisation. And although the cosmological aspect of the place is lost through this terminology, this may be to engender a new cosmological rooting and a new political order from Shanghai. But before exhibiting the Chinese Red in the city on the sea, Song Jianming went to Hangzhou where his research centre is located. There, from the idea of de-cosmologised imperial reds, Song and his team created the Chinese Red: a composite red, that is to say a red made up of seven reds.

And it is the written character “red” that was officially displayed on the front of the Chinese pavilion on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2009.

Four banners were hung bearing the two following slogans: *xieshou shibohui*



<http://www.expo2010.cn/a/20090608/000005.htm>

携手世博会 which means “hand in hand with the World Expo” and *hongzhuang zhongguo guan* 红妆中国馆, that is to say “red ornament of the Chinese pavilion”, *hongzhuang* being an expression that usually refers to the traditional Chinese wedding dress. These expressions promulgate an alliance with the world, restoring order in the universe. A new era is born. Just as a specific colour was associated to each Chinese dynasty, Chinese Red is the symbol of China post-2010. And thanks to this newly elaborated matter, the country is in

keeping with the double (national and cosmological) universal.

***b. A “fluttering” and “turning its back on light” red vs. a composite, constant and harmonious red***

Song recalls that the wavelength of the colour red is 0.78 micrometres, and that is why it is very “powerful”<sup>26</sup> and “strong”<sup>27</sup>. “It can be seen from far away, red ‘takes the eye away’”<sup>28</sup>. Consequently, this colour involves a major risk: it can stay inside the eye,<sup>29</sup> and will consequently always leave green stains in the eye.<sup>30</sup> In other words, if it over-stimulates the cones of the eye, red may be seen as green and stand out from its original base by refraction. And yet, Song underlines that the Chinese Red must above all “flutter”.<sup>31</sup> Once the red is fixed, whatever the reds that go to making it up but providing they are uniformly visible, *Zhongguo hong* is created.

Yet Song then evokes another problem he encountered: the lack of brightness of the edifice, even though it faces South. The Crown of the East is indeed a “mushroom-like structure”,<sup>32</sup> akin to that of a cone,<sup>33</sup> suggesting a “parasol effect”,<sup>34</sup> since the pavilion is topped by a giant roof placed on corbels.<sup>35</sup> Most of time, the building is cast in shadow: literally, “it turns its back on the light”,<sup>36</sup> it is dark.<sup>37</sup> Since the red could then be seen as black, it was necessary to “soften”<sup>38</sup> the colour. Why is it so important to provide the Crown with light?

<sup>26</sup> Qiang 强.

<sup>27</sup> Lihai 厉害.

<sup>28</sup> *Yuanyuan dou neng kandao de, hen qiang yan* 远远就能看到的，很抢眼.

<sup>29</sup> *Hui canliu zai yanjing li* 会残留在眼睛里.

<sup>30</sup> *Yanjing laoshi you luban* 眼睛老是有绿斑.

<sup>31</sup> *Piaoqilai* 飘起来.

<sup>32</sup> *Mogu jiegou* 蘑菇结构.

<sup>33</sup> *Zhuixing* 锥形.

<sup>34</sup> *Yangsan xiaoying* 阳伞效应.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. <http://www.expo2010.cn/a/20090608/000005.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> *Beiguang zhuangtai* 背光状态.

<sup>37</sup> *Ming'an* 明暗.

<sup>38</sup> *Ruanhua* 软化.

Associated with the sky and with a palace, the building is logically oriented southwards, since it is linked to the summer, to light, to the *yang*. Nevertheless, by creating a parasol-like roof, the architects have at the same time darkened and so to speak added rather a lot of *yin* to its surface. For the Chinese colour expert, Song Jianming, it was crucial to take it out of the darkness, and therefore to tinge it with *yang*.

Yet in China, red is yang, and Chinese Red is all the more yang since it is made up of seven reds, seven being an symbolic number which refers to the acme of the *yang* and to a “centered totality”, an idea that confirms the hypothesis previously developed associating the Crown of the East with the centre and with a new orientation of the country by establishing the centre of the world (*Zhongguo*) in Shanghai.

Of the seven reds making up Chinese Red,<sup>39</sup> four are used on the inside and three on the outside. No explications are given for such a subdivision, and that is why it seems difficult to find a meaning for it. Nevertheless, let us underline that four (*yin*) are applied to the outside (*yang*), while three (*yang*) are associated with the inside (*yin*). The combination of *yin* and yang elements is striking; it echoes the “earth-sky” hierogamic process of the Crown’s structure.

### *c. Seven shades of red to reflect New Confucianism orders*

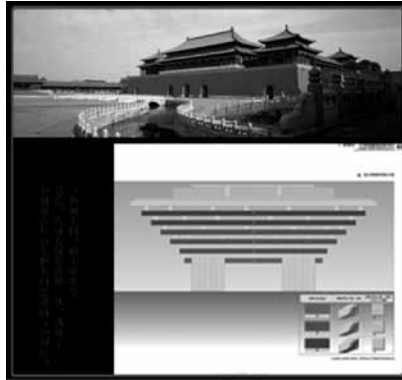
Let us come back to the seven shades of this new red. They are thought to be imperceptible to visitors who only perceive the homogeneity of the Chinese Red (which is nevertheless heterogeneous). Indeed, the task entrusted to Song Jianming consisted in creating an illusion, that is to see a uniform red. Hence, it is about controlling visitors’ perception. For that reason, Song always talks about those who are endowed with knowledge, the only ones to be conscious that Chinese Red is made up of different reds, whereas the “average person” (*yiban ren* 一般人) — he himself uses this expression — , cannot see the unicity as well as the multiplicity of this colour. The “average person” experiences the sensation

<sup>39</sup> *Hong fen qi se* 红分七色.

(*ganjue* 感觉) caused by the one who possesses enough knowledge to achieve this effect, which conceals the heterogeneous reality behind a homogeneous perception. In other words, a shade of red which is at the same time a single and multiple colour refers explicitly to unity and differences all combined together. Moreover, it incarnates the Confucian slogan “seeking unity with differences”;<sup>40</sup> a correlative (and homophone) with “seeking harmony with differences”<sup>41</sup>, both precepts that are the foundation stone of contemporary political orientations.

Although such an ideology, promoting the strength of unity as well as distinction, appears to be implicitly asserted and designed by Song Jianming, it is explicitly evoked in literature about the Chinese Red.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, we can read that the Chinese Red “incarnated the Chinese philosophy: ‘seeking Harmony with Differences’”.<sup>43</sup>

Here we recognize a political parable where unity is sought with differences that are created, imposed, and perceived in their very foundation by some (a minority made up of experts) and in their superficiality by others (a majority made up of the non-initiated in the ongoing process). The Chinese Red bears a



<http://cp.expo2010.cn/BuildEast.html>

<sup>40</sup> *He er bu tong* 合而不同.

<sup>41</sup> 和而不同

<sup>42</sup> Cf. <http://cp.expo2010.cn/BuildEast.html>.

<sup>43</sup> *Tixian le « he er butong » de zhonghua zhexue* 体现了和而不同得中华哲.

subliminal message. It is a colour serving propaganda purposes that helps to manipulate the masses, and to propagate the ideology of new Confucianism.

Song, who masters the traditional Chinese codes, has thus adapted the latter in order to fall in line with the slogans disseminated by the Party promoting a “return” to Confucian values. He shows the world what the Chinese authorities want him to show; he indoctrinates the population. In this sense, the scholar integrates people into a specific dynamic, into a process made of heterogeneity and homogeneity. Thus, the colour of the Crown of the East also has an educative value; its aim is to elevate the mind of the masses. This comes across very clearly when reading one of Song’s interviews: “Can visitors distinguish the seven shades of red? ‘No, unless the person is a colour expert,’ Song smiled”.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, by observing the Crown closely, different shapes of colours are visible.

“People see colors not only with their eyes, but also with their experiences and subjective perception” [Song Jianming]. During the interview, Song conducted a very simple “experiment” to prove that people do see prettier things with the support of modern civilization. He showed us a model of the China Pavilion in which only a single shade of red was used; then he showed us another model



Photographs A. Névon (09/28/2011)

<sup>44</sup> Cf. [http://en.expo2010.cn/a/20090722/000004\\_1.htm](http://en.expo2010.cn/a/20090722/000004_1.htm).

on which seven shades were judiciously arranged. We saw nothing wrong with the first one before looking at the second. However, when we saw the second model, we immediately thought “survival of the fittest”. According to Song, as simple as it may seem, the experiment succeeded in proving that people’s taste for colour is in direct proportion to their cultural and ethical level. He was hoping to elevate ordinary visitors’ taste through the “Chinese Red” of the China Pavilion, and to make it an esthetic experience stored in visitors’ minds.

## Conclusion

*The Crown of the East incarnates the new Chinese civilisation project in the light of the globalisation process.* This extremely sophisticated edifice reveals the new orientation of China within the international constellation. Through this building, the city on the sea affirms its position at the centre of the world and sides with foreign countries while activating a complicated cosmological process which genders a fusion of the two “universal” (we qualify this process as “double universal anchorage”): cosmological and international.

The Crown of the East interconnects elements specific to Chinese thought which are re-arranged in the structure to edify a new era where China — thus the East — reign as master of the world, in the sense that it ensures mastery of the universe; it is from China that the universe is set in order. The study of this building helps to understand what “universal” means for China, in 2010, and how the latter integrates foreign conceptions of the universal in order to incorporate them into its own symbolic system.

Although Shanghai was at the heart of the process of establishing a new geopolitical order from the second half of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, it has now recovered its yesteryear status of border-town whose porosity is now assumed and affirmed, now that the stakes differ of course from those of the last two centuries. For it is now China, not foreigners, that attributes this role to Shanghai, while the relationships

between the Chinese and those who long ago were referred to as “barbarians” (*yi* 夷) are closer and at the same time more reflective: attempts are made on both sides to understand how the other thinks and acts. Although intellectual exchanges have mutually developed over time, they still come up against misunderstandings. The political visions of both sides keep on diverging (let us simply refer as an example to the endless debate about the Human rights). And the Chinese tradition which does not differentiate between domestic and international politics, with the same rules fixing the relationships between people in a family, in the State and in the international community, has been expressed symbolically in Shanghai since 2010. Sino-centrism persists and seems to be coupled, in its supremacy, with an international recognition.

China has given itself a new position in the world while creating a relationship of economic dependence with Westerners who have been weakened by the recurring economic crises. Today, China is the country that governs the capitalist order of the world. Compared to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the roles consequently totally reversed — hence the Oriental Orientalism promoted via the Crown of the East. Shanghai is now at the core of the new geopolitical networking. After having been colonized by foreigners, rejected by the Maoist regime, it has slowly resurfaced since Jiang Zemin’s time to become, under the presidency of Hu Jingtao, the key link in the international balance, and therefore more powerful than ever.



(日本語レジюме)

東方の冠——上海という新しい世界の中心

オーレリ・ネヴォ

2010年に行われた上海万博において、中国国家館の建物は「東方の冠」と名づけられた。「東方の冠」には、中国文化の固有の表象が嵌めこまれるとともに再配置されている。その意味で、「東方の冠」は単なる万博のパビリオンの1つではなく、中国の伝統的な思想や文化、価値観、普遍性を表現し、世界に対して中国が自らの立場を示した建物である。また、19世紀から20世紀にかけて植民地であった上海という都市が、21世紀になって外国ではなく中国自身の手によって「新しい世界の中心」という性格を手にしたことは、「東方の冠」から「新たな世界の秩序」が生まれる可能性を予想させるものであった。本論は、文化的な要素の解釈を通し、「東方の冠」が持つ意味を検討するものである。