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Faster but further: mobility and transport

Book section

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FASTER BUT FURTHER

Mobility and transport

Transport is one of the most striking indicators of Shanghai's rapid pace of change. Borne out by the impressive statistics, it is the actual experience of movement in the public spaces of the city that makes one feel the enormity of the transformation. Walking among thousands of commuters at Shanghai's largest underground interchange under People's Square or attempting to cross a six-lane highway across the Bund to snatch a view of the esplanade, emphasises the sense of stress of a burgeoning city. In the ten years to 2000, the length of roads increased by 40 per cent, and the number of cars quadrupled to just over one million. Official predictions state that by 2020 Shanghai will have 2.5 million private cars, and that daily motor vehicle trips will increase to seven million compared to just over three million in 2000. Public transport provision will increasingly rely on Shanghai's rail system, which the city is planning to expand to 540 km in 2020. The metro system's current daily capacity of 1.4 million is predicted to reach 10 million in 2020.

Increasing levels of car ownership and the expanding car industry in Shanghai – regarded by China's economic planners as a key growth sector – will increasingly challenge the very essence of the city. Prosperity associated with employment in car manufacturing and its associated industries is a key driver of Shanghai's economic welfare. So are the improvements to the standard of living promised by quiet, comfortable homes away from the overcrowded and polluted central city. In comparison to other cities like London and Paris, Shanghai has an extremely low percentage of road space – literally, the amount of

tarmac – making it structurally incompatible for a city with a projected exponential growth in car traffic. Further-more, rising levels of car use would exacerbate increasing energy consumption, worsen pollution and add to traffic congestion. Hence, the heated debate in policy circles of whether precious farmland surrounding the city should be sacrificed to new roads and urban sprawl.

There is a risk that Shanghai's communities, already challenged by a widening income gap, could be faced with a lasting physical imprint of separation that will inhibit social cohesion. The city is also facing a familiar yet difficult choice in funding priorities, needing to decide between investing in more and more road and parking projects, or increasing spending on public transport. The newly rich and empowered car lobby is proactive in making its voice heard, arguing against car restrictions and taxes, that make it more difficult to manage urban mobility and the use of cars.

For the central area, where the growing number of vehicles is particularly problematic, two strategies are being followed. The first is to increase road density levels, mainly by constructing elevated highways. The second is to focus on improving the capacity of the existing network, mainly by separating different transport modes. Cycling, although banned on most main roads, is still vital. Today some nine million bicycles are owned by the Shanghainese, and are used for 30% of all trips. However, cycling is now viewed as a competitor to public transport, slowing down traffic and causing accidents. The city aims to reduce its share by 25% within the next five years. Walking is regarded as an integral part of Shanghai's transport system not only for short journeys but also as a feeder for public and private transport, and there are plans to expand the network of pedestrian streets

including the pedestrianisation of the Bund alongside the Huangpu River by building a tunnel to accommodate the existing six-lane highway.

The future of Shanghai's physical structure will not only be strongly influenced by its transport system, but also by the decisions made regarding density levels and mixed-use zoning. Reducing residential density levels within the inner city, and building beyond the edge of the city, is regarded as the key to increasing the amount of personal living space. A rigid zoning approach, which separates uses and dedicates large proportions of land – particularly for new developments – to discrete residential, office, industrial or service uses, will have a huge impact on mobility requirements. Over the last 10 years, the daily distance travelled by Shanghai residents has increased by 50%. The consequences of this land-use policy are already apparent: the original plan to build nine new satellite cities surrounding Shanghai – all of which would have to rely on rapid transit access – have been dramatically curtailed due to cost implications, and only three new towns are currently under construction.

Clearly, Shanghai's transport demands are not directly comparable to European or North American cities. Yet, it is intriguing to note that the private car, which most competes with public transport in cities like London, New York or Berlin, is seen in Shanghai as complementary to public transport, (particularly buses), and that "third means" – bicycles and motorbikes – are regarded as problematic and targeted for elimination. Quite a paradigm reversal from the current fashion for sustainable development in western cities.