



A worker stands on a ledge on the 117th floor as a window is hoisted into place by a crane

VIEW FROM THE TOP

Shanghai Tower is the world's second-tallest skyscraper, dominating the city's financial centre. Photographer *Noah Sheldon* documented the workers who took on the dangerous job of building it. By *Gabriel Wildau*

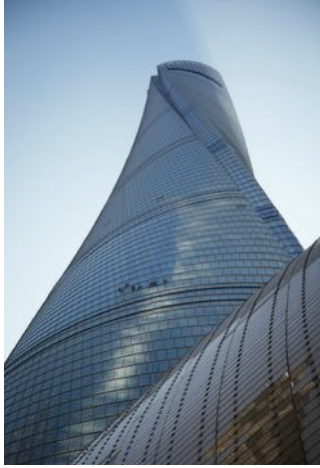
Shanghai's skyline has long stood as a symbol of the future. Just ask the many Hollywood directors who have used the city as a backdrop for tales of artificial intelligence, time travel and high-tech espionage. In Spike Jonze's *Her*, Shanghai plays a futuristic Los Angeles, a backdrop for Joaquin Phoenix's love affair with a computer operating system voiced by Scarlett Johansson. In *Looper*, time-travelling hitman Bruce Willis moves to Shanghai to live for 30 years until 2074, when his younger self will arrive to kill him. In *Mission: Impossible III*, Tom Cruise rappels down the 88-storey Jinmao Tower after stealing a bioweapon. When construction was completed on the 127-storey Shanghai Tower in 2015, the city gained a potent new futurist symbol. At 632m, it is the

world's second-tallest building, surpassed only by Dubai's 828m-tall Burj Khalifa. Gensler, the US company that designed the tower, hired photographer Noah Sheldon to document its construction. While producing architectural photos to satisfy his client, Sheldon took advantage of his access to the site to capture other kinds of images. Like most big Chinese construction projects of the past 35 years, Shanghai Tower was built by migrant workers from small cities and rural areas. Sheldon's photographs capture the pride and physical confidence of workers engaged in dangerous work at high altitude. "You'd have a whole team of, say, scaffolding riggers, who would all be from one town in Henan. And they would all be cousins or friends," says Sheldon. "They're proud of the work, and we tapped

into that. The way I approached the workers was to say, 'You should be documented in the same way the building is.'" Especially striking was the use of female construction workers, who mostly did the same work as their male counterparts. "The women were doing some really heavy, heavy labour," says Sheldon. "They'd usually be carrying the same huge things as the men." Lujiazui, the financial centre that hosts Shanghai Tower, is the ultimate symbol of China's transformation since Deng Xiaoping broke with Maoist state planning in 1978. As recently as the late 1980s, the area was still a sparse collection of warehouses, factories and low-rise residential buildings. But change came quickly. In 1996, the city's mayor boasted that 18 per cent of the world's ►

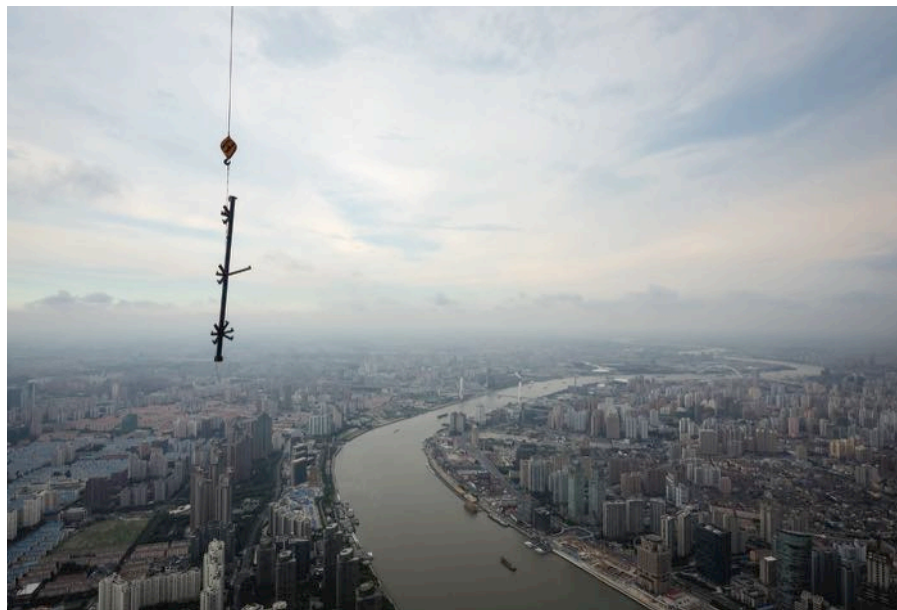


Facing page: a welder stands on a grate atop temporary scaffolding about 600m above the ground
Left: various workers and, from top, temporary scaffolding; the tower with workers (barely visible) washing windows; a worker takes a nap on a stack of boards; a builder's jacket



'You'd have a whole team who would all be cousins or friends. They're proud of the work'





‘Economists have theorised about the existence of a “skyscraper curse”’



Clockwise from left: a worker guides a wall section into place; the view from the tower; two temporary loading docks are cantilevered out of the building from the 118th and 119th floors; in one of the 19-storey “sky atriums”, a red carpet has been left following a visit by a government delegation



◀ cranes were in Shanghai. Today Lujiazui is a dense warren of skyscrapers.

The tower achieved worldwide fame when a video of two Russian daredevils sneaking on to the site and climbing the unfinished building without safety equipment went viral in 2014. The incident made Sheldon’s work more difficult. Even with all his paperwork in order, security guards were suspicious of a foreigner prowling around with a camera. They also found his choice of subjects baffling.

“It was definitely something that the minders were worried about. They couldn’t understand why I was taking pictures of the workers,” he says.

From base to top, the tower twists 120 degrees, a figure calculated to minimise the impact of Shanghai’s high winds. Gensler says this innovation saved \$58m worth of structural materials.

With the tower complete, the question is where Shanghai and China’s economy go from here. Economists have theorised about the existence of a “skyscraper curse”: the world’s tallest building often correlates with an impending economic crash. The Empire State Building in New York, the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur and the Burj Khalifa are notable examples.

Some analysts say China’s real-estate market is a bubble. The Shanghai Tower’s agent says only 60 per cent of the office space is currently leased. If the market does crash, workers like those in Sheldon’s photos would be among the hardest hit, and the tower will stand as a monument to irrational exuberance. **FT**

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