

## **The Rise of Public Urban Space in China**

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## The Rise of Public Urban Space in China

Since the beginning of the “Policy of the Open Door”, initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China has the fastest growing national economy worldwide. This growth is mirrored not only by a breath-taking urban growth but also by an incredible pace of change of urban placemaking. The new significance, awareness and attention that is given to planning of open public space has already led to some excellent results. They show that China has started setting off for a modern civil society of Chinese provenience.

However, this take off is an arduous one. With regard to their professional point of view planners and designers only too often have to bow to expectations (and taste) of political elites. Pushed ahead by a mixture of professional vanity and institutional pressure many officials tend to interfere in urban design - even down to details. In order to represent greatness and cosmopolitan modernity places have to be very big showing expensive materials, sculptures, fountain games and so on, while the little, ordinary, daily needs of the young and old city dwellers were often disregarded.

In Xi'an a brand new wall on a large new place enclosing the Tang originated pagoda of the “Big Wild Goose” cuts the famous monument from its environment at the expense of its appearance and the urban context. Likewise unacceptable is a new shopping mall just opposite the historic bell tower at the central crossroads of the Ming city of Xi'an: With a disrespectful, competitive attitude the new building tries to claim for the first attention. These Problems do not remain undiscovered: “Whether a building is well integrated in the urban fabric is dependent on its impact on public space. You can only define the individual position of a building clearly and succeed in getting a good design solution when the urban context is the starting point of the design process. Today we very often see buildings which, being supported by an excessive individual style, tend to show something very special and thus try to rise up above the urban context. This behaviour disturbs the relations between the buildings and the urban environment and it destroys its quality.” (Zhu Xiaodi 2003, 118)

New China has severe trouble with the old one. On the other hand it has to be admitted that the idea of civil public space is something very new in China. The “Middle Empire” never experienced “synecism”, being the precondition traditional democracy and the evolution of civil society in Europe. Thus it could never develop “democratic space”. This historical fact is still influencing present China.

On the other side a feudal system which framed or impeded the emergence of public space never got a real chance in China. Influenced by Confucianism a system of vassals and grants compara-

ble to the European feudalism was more or less abolished during the Qin- and the Han-Dynasty, i.e. in the third century BC. At that time the feudal system was replaced by a system of central bureaucratic administration, operated by highly educated imperial officials, the so called “literati officials”. (Schmidt-Glintzer 1997, 66 ff) With regard to its economy, rationality and culture it is not possible to compare the imperial court with the European model of the rural, self-sustainable, decentral and sacral “eukos”.

The absence of “oikoi” makes clear the straightforward doing with market economy in old China. At the time of the Han empire walled and zoned market spaces (streetmarkets), divided into groups of products, are already well established in Chinese cities. (Wu, Weija 1993 90 ff) Being strongly controlled by imperial bureaucracy these streetmarkets are hardly different from those centralised trading places which we find in pre-urban ancient and medieval Europe. As far as they have to be taken as “extensions” of the omnipresent central palace economy you will not find similar institutions in European urban history since the rise of the Greek polis. The Chinese tradesman acts inside the imperial system and not - as in Europe - against or even outside the feudal system.

For this reason old Chinese market economy was not able to support bourgeois “isonomy” (juridical equality, Meier 1980), which in Europe sets off Renaissance and its consequences: enlightenment, nomothetic science, industrialisation, capitalism, modernisation etc. The missing of an urban bourgeoisie becomes the main reason for China's failure in coping with industrial modernisation. In the end only Mao Zedong's adaption of the Lenin model of “catching up development” could lead to successful initial industrialisation in times of western hegemony.

Being an “organ” of the emperors omnipresent “body” the old Chinese city could never be “free”. The emperor symbolizes his power and presence by walls, gates and by a strong spatial order. However, as feudal structures were disposed very early, the imperial centralism never led to fundamental opposition against urban life. The basic European conflict between urban and rural powers remained unknown in China. So its bureaucracy was able to compensate partly the disadvantages of an urban bourgeoisie. However, for triggering off industrial development an urban class of entrepreneurs and a liberal market (including labour and land) was needed. But this lies beyond the means of Chinese rational centralism.

During the whole emperors times squares, gardens, parks etc. remained exclusive spaces, accessible only for the imperial court society, the high and middle class of state officials and rich merchants for contemplative purposes. The (symbolic) centres of the capital cities were formed by non-public “forbidden cities”, utterly different from the, as a rule, (social) public European city centres. The term “as a rule” reminds us that the European city centre was often controlled

by rural, i.e. feudal authorities. The renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer e.g. puts a castle, similar to a forbidden city, into the centre of his German ideal city drawing.

While the old European city, according to its bourgeois culture, tends to “turn its inside out” by staging public spaces (see the “theatre of facades” of markets and main streets), the old Chinese cities have been introverted (similar to Arab cities). Inner courtyard gardens could serve for balancing urban density and hectic pace. However, they provided this only for the small circle of privileged families. Even the use of the city gates, of streets and quarters, were assigned to the different classes in accordance with their rank. The Chinese city mirrored this hierarchy.

A reasonable comment on the policy of public space at the time of Mao Zedong and particularly at the time of the culture revolution surmounts the issues of this analysis. It only should be mentioned that the huge Tianmen square, built under Mao in the 50th, combines the gesture of imperial times with the staging of the mass and thus shows parallels to absolutistic “spaces of power”. Tianmen was an exclusive place. It was not built to be an open public space. It rather aimed at staging the “proletarian public” by “mass ornamentation” (Siegfried Krakauer). The very size of the tremendous square informs us about a totalitarian purpose, even today, at a time when China is going to devote itself to the topic of “open public space” as intensive as prudent.

This essay is as well not suitable to give appropriate comments on the influences of European colonial settlements on China's culture of public space. However, it has to be assumed that there must have been transfers the consequences of which could be identified in the speed of public space development. The “Bund”-Promenade on the waterfront of Huangpo River in Shanghai has never lost its attractive atmosphere - not even in the course of the “culture revolution”. It is told in Shanghai, that during the period of chaos and confusion this has been the only public space in China where lovers could meet undisturbed. Maybe this story is an exaggeration of local patriots, but it confirms the unique magic which this place is exuding - today, when contrasting the formidable skyline of new Pudong CBD, even more than ever before.

By showing a tendency towards open public space production present China evidently started a new long march towards modern civil society. In the North-Chinese city Jilin just on the edge of new Centuria Square designed by Zhang Lingling you can find a constellation giving a comment on this change just as inspiring as ironic: Here we find an older Mao sculpture embedded in a high quality new open recreational space. This inclusion should be interpreted as a sign of respect for the past. On the other hand the stretched out arm of Mao seem to confirm the difficulties which escort the process of modernization: Instead of pointing to the new landmark in the north, his hand points to the east.

In present China the topic of public space has to be assigned to the general discourse of quality in

urban development which reflects the upcoming end of mere liberal industrialisation. This period of scarcely formally regulated market economy is characterised by strong priority on quantitative growth (GDP), spatial acceleration and specialisation (zoning), precedence of “hard” location factors (e.g. cost of land, traffic systems, labour market, urban infrastructure, educational facilities).

Under these circumstances planning and designing of high quality have little chance. “Deliberate planning and designing of public space has been widely neglected in our county. (...) Problems as overcrowding, of bad urbanisation quality, of aging of population, of shortage of building land, of too high urban density, of fast growing stock of cars etc. are increasing day by day, pushed ahead by a tremendous economical dynamic. It makes the always rare public space appearing most unfavourable. The cities are unstructured, they are missing vividness, they are colourless. In some cities and regions the situation has become unbearable.” (Zhu Xiaodi 2003, 117)

For to understand the spatial orientation of Chinese citizens not only the influence of Western lifestyles but also old Chinese traditions and customs should be taken into consideration. Different from European and even more US-American people, who prefer suburban neighbourhoods, Chinese of the middle and higher classes continue giving favour to high density environments. These environments are mostly gated. However, this is not only due to an American influence. First of all “gating” is deeply rooted in old Chinese traditions of social, occupational and even ethnical segregation. At present these traditions were socially reinterpreted and fuelled by the (supposed) need for protection and security. The more “gating” is promoted by investors. For them walls serve for both, for protecting and for symbolising their property. Today many quarters are suffering from an intolerable density of barriers. In Shanghai the department of urban planning started looking for remedies and commissioned planners to set up plans for reducing the quantity of walls.

Since the middle of the 90th qualitative issues of spacial development get growing attention. Increasing urban affluence and the interconnected growth of a middle class are forming the social background for this change. Organic design, influenced by garden city images and often appearing like hybrids of Singapore and English Gardens pushes back the fordistic, pre-fabricated mono-structured settlements of the past and get forehand. Let's quote a Chinese planner: “When starting construction of residential areas (in Shenzhen) emphasise was given to a “hard” character of the settlement, of its green space, its living space and of the arrangement of the Buildings. However, new residential projects are stressing the “soft” character of meeting spots, individually shapes buildings, high quality environments carefully equipped with amenities.” (Wang Peng 2003, 14f)

Lack of public green space is a lasting problem of Chinese cities. Scoring an average of about 6.5 m<sup>2</sup> per capita in 2002 the metropolis of Shanghai does not so bad, although an average of about 20 m<sup>2</sup> minimum has to be meant for suitable. By taking a lot of measures the city government want to get to an average of 11 m<sup>2</sup> high quality greenspace until 2005, five years before the opening of the Shanghai World Exhibition. "According to the plans of the city the system of public greenspace has to be improved by forest rings revolving the city with a width of 100 m, by five broader forest belts und eight green corridors. The peoples park in the city centre as well as one park in each district will be transformed into public greenspace with trees. The more every quarter develops one public park which should be not less than one hectare by size. The concept puts most emphasis on five big new parks."(Xiang Zuquan 2003, 48f).

The city of Jilin in the north as well as Zuhai near Macao in the south have already reached a share in greenspace of more than 30 % of total cityspace. That means for both about 20 m<sup>2</sup> per capita and a leading position in new China. Let me end by quoting Zhu Xiaodi again: "Planning of public space is the main content of urban design. It stresses the interrelations between the buildings and the city. Urban development can only be successful if it aims at constructing emotional spaces with a cultural atmosphere and if it offers places for different activities aiming at changing the still existing negative places and improving the quality of public space." (Zhu Xiaodi 2003, 119)

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