

The Chinese “Streetscape”. Investigations on the performative destiny of a social and linguistic space

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# **The Chinese “Streetscape”**

## **Investigations on the performative destiny of a social and linguistic space**

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In Europe the street is traditionally the place of self-representation: the “Strada Nuova” in Genova has been designed in 1550 to allow noble families to build their own palaces in a competition of beauty, richness and power. In the American tradition the street became overall a place dominated by its market role (Venturi on Las Vegas, 1972). In China streets are the real public space for people’s daily life and its essential activities (trading, eating, playing, discussing): their role in urban life is so strong that sometime a street can appear even where the planning didn’t establish that.

The western main urban public/social space is the square, but for the eastern countries - especially China- the streets represent the most representative urban public space that can be used together without the class differences.

However, from the ancient cities to today’s high-density cities, the Chinese streets, because of their social role, have experienced also a very important connection with shop signs, posters, notices of all kinds, flags and signs, luminous writings. All these objects are a kind of ornament of daily-life as well as a real interesting documentary material, useful to understand permanencies and variations in the use of the cities during their transition from the former order to the new one.

The paper introduces the framework and the contents of a multidisciplinary research project at work, between urban morphology and Chinese language and culture. (max. 1500 characters, spaces included)

Keywords: Street, Urban Landscape, Chinese Language, Urban Morphology

# The Chinese “Streetscape”

## Investigations on the performative destiny of a social and linguistic space

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### 1. Introduction

In Europe the street is traditionally the place of self-representation: the “Strada Nuova” in Genova has been designed in 1550 to allow noble families to build their own palaces in a competition of beauty, richness and power. In the American tradition the street became overall a place dominated by its market role<sup>1</sup>. In China streets are the real public space for people’s daily life and its essential activities (trading, eating, playing, discussing): their role in urban life is so strong that sometime a street can appear even where the planning didn’t establish that.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown, S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1972.

Between the end of the Seventies and the second decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the topic of the role of the street in “social urban form” became more and more relevant, giving to the studies on Chinese collective spaces some general elements useful to start and also to understand the cultural differences between Western and Far Asian civilizations<sup>2</sup>.

The so called “street-life” in China<sup>3</sup> has been initially investigated through a rich and anthological approach<sup>4</sup>, moving them towards arguments related to urban form<sup>5</sup> as well as towards the “pop” image of the city itself<sup>6</sup>.

However, literature has not yet explored the specific theme of the relationship between writing and the street in the Asian city and in particular in the Chinese city. For this reason, real field research is necessary.

So, this research moves along two main directions to describe the social role of the street in contemporary urban China (in the hypothesis of a continuity with the Chinese cultural tradition):

a) a first direction studies the street as a medium, a place for communication and writing, as a cornerstone of the Chinese tradition;

b) a second direction studies the anthropological foundations of the Chinese urban form and in particular the street as an urban space.

The Authors of this papers decided to keep together (in an inter-disciplinary investigation) their different competencies and their different references’ backgrounds in order to literally read the Chinese urban spaces.

## 2. The street as a medium. Linguistic finds

Within the program of the Joint Research Unit “Transitional Morphologies”, one specific project is the study of the permeating presence of writings, both public and private, in the scenic/performative space of the Chinese street.

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<sup>2</sup> S. Anderson, *On Streets. Streets as Elements of Urban Structure*, MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1978; Mehta, V., *The street. A quintessential social public space*, Routledge, London 2013; J.W.R. Whitehand et al., *The typological process and the morphological period: a cross cultural assessment*, in “Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design”, 41 (2014), pp. 512-533.

<sup>3</sup> S. JIANG, *Street life and the people’s city*, in “Architectural Design”, 78/5 (2008), monographic issue *New urban China* (edited by Laurence Liauw for John Wiley Press, London).

<sup>4</sup> M. Dutton, *Streetlife China*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998.

<sup>5</sup> D. Hassenpflug, *城市. The Urban Code of China*, Birkhäuser, Basel, 2010 (2008).

<sup>6</sup> J. De Kloet, L. Scheen (eds.), *Spectacle and the City. Chinese Urbanities in Art and Popular Culture*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2013.

Starting from a collection of pictures, a detailed classification can give an idea of the diversity of the written objects in the Chinese streets. They can be in fact classified though: the support of the writings (wall, panel, metal plane, fabric banner, paper or cardboard etc.), the location of the writing (wall, balcony, billboard, road sign etc.), the nature of the location (public, private or mixed), the typology of the writing (handwriting, printed writing, calligraphy etc.), the graphic features (color of the characters, color of the background, combination with images etc.); the purpose of the writing (education, communication, advertising, political or social instruction etc.).

A possible study case is the city of Nanjing (Jiangsu Province), where the Joint Research Unit “Transitional Morphologies” is based.

What will be presented here is a small selection of photographs from the Archive of the Joint Research Unit, in order to exemplify the different types of writings will be analyzed during the project and also their morphological features (Fig. 01).

Nowadays, in the process of high-speed urbanization, street space as streetscape in China is facing a lot problems such as the poor quality of materials and facilities, the overflow of motor vehicles, a general lack of security. The poor construction standards, the mechanical urbanism, the rapid growth of cars and population, make Chinese street no longer a comfortable place to be lived as a community place.

However, the tradition of the street perceived as the main social place is still alive, above all considering the alleys, the pedestrian streets and the secondary paths along the big avenue (Fig. 02).

In the Chinese dictionary, the “street” is described “the road that has buildings on the both sides”. Many words use the character “jie” (街), that means street, such as “jie fang” (街坊, that means neighborhood), “jie shi” (街市, that means street market), and “jie tou xiang wei” (街头巷尾, that means alleys). Of course, as an urban object, the street is a physical space, but words as “jie fang” and “jie shi” bring more social meanings. “Jie fang” is used to refer to the streets in community, which turns to the adjective of the neighbor living nearby, because of the important social meaning that the street itself plays in China for people’s daily life.

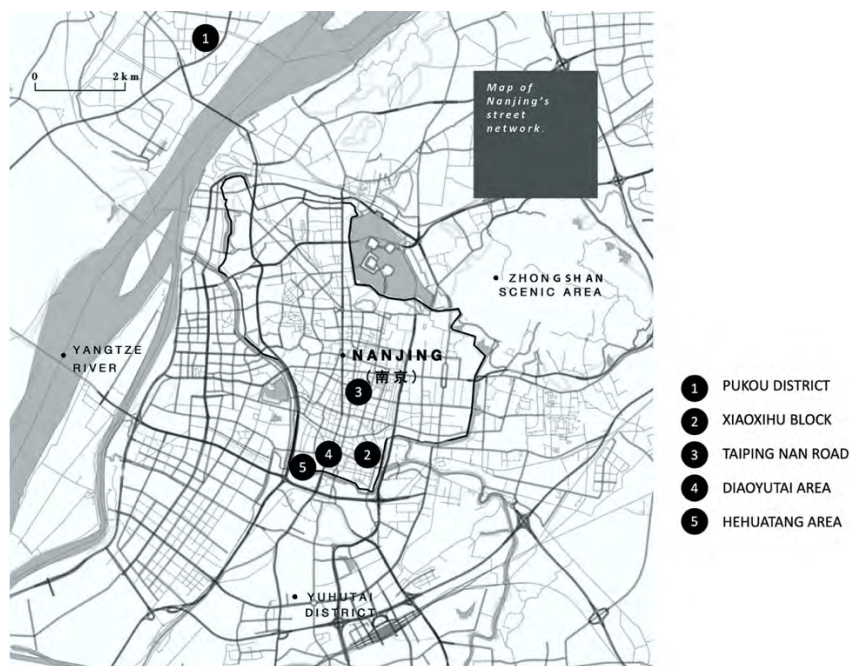


Fig. 01 – Map of Nanjing with the placement of the main areas considered for the research

Since a community is a group of persons sharing something (resources, uses, feelings, places and so on), the language is, obviously, the main part of the community life. In an imagery like the Chinese one, where character and words traditionally play also an ornamental role, the written language in the street becomes a documentary material to study what it is possible to describe as the Chinese “Streetscape”.



Fig. 02 – The “Left Street” in Pukou District

Many are the uses of written characters in the streetscape. Often, buildings walls and construction site walls are kept as instruments for instructions from local and central authorities (Fig. 03). In other case, mobile red banners are on buildings, bearing temporary slogans (Fig. 04). Sometime, blue permanent panels are hanged in specific places as conveyors of referential messages (Fig. 05). Frequently, even hand written words or sentences (for example pair of vertical lines written on the sides of a door as couplets) refer to a specific occasion or political messages (Fig. 06). Moral instructions can be given by vertical panels on public buildings, paying as conveyors (Fig. 07).

The colors, the graphic style, the material support, the being machine-made or hand-made, also the position in the street, all they are some of the features of the street written, that must be kept in consideration, classified and studied. At a deeper level, also the language features (as the meaning and the rhetoric use of the words) must become the core of the research.



Fig. 03 - Urban regeneration works in XiaoXiHu block



Fig. 04 - Red banners on building to be demolished in Taiping Nan Road



Fig. 05 – Functional elements of urban space in XiaoXiHu block



Fig. 06 – View on a private courtyard from the street within XiaoXiHu block



Fig. 07 – Temporary market in Taiping Nan Road

### 3. The street as a space. Morphological traditions

The “linguistic space” represented by the Chinese “streetscape” is part of a bigger phenomenon, due to the transitional nature of urban form. The transformation of the street in the real place of daily life (where people cook, eat, play, debate, meet, cultivate vegetables, keep pet animals) comes from an important urban revolution which happened in China between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and which effects are still vivid and important in the pedestrian streets of nowadays China. This is one of the main topics of the studies on the urban morphology of Nanjing and other Chinese cities.

The Tang and Song urban revolution (known also as Chinese medieval city revolution) generally refers to the urban form changes in ancient China, from the Tang Dynasty to the Song Dynasty. During that period, the urban form turned from a closed one to an open one. Until Tang Dynasty, the “fang” (坊) as a residential area and the “shi” (市) as a commercial area were separated in the pattern of the city. The “shi” (realm of collective urban life) was set up in a concentrated manner, while the “fang” (realm of individual sides of urban life) was closed by a walled square precinct and shut down at night to

impose a curfew. With the slack of the management of the wall, the walls began to be destroyed, and shops appeared inside the square.

In the last stage of Tang Dynasty, the “fang” walls were no longer mandatory to establish and repair and they finally disappeared in the Song dynasty.



Fig. 08 – Small family restaurant in HeHuaTang Area

After removing the constraints of the wall, the city of the “fang” gathered together to become a city working in the framework of a street system as a social management system. From a political point of view, the centralization of the state power in Song Dynasty further was reflected in the development of the city’s public life by weakening the living boundaries and by widening the public space. Because of the urban planning under the guidance of military defend, the city showed more and more dense urban fabric made by houses and extensive courtyards. There were no wide streets in the neighbourhood, the market was so crowded that the carriages could not pass.

In some way, before the Song Dynasty, the “wall” had been the real boundary between collective and individual sides of urban life: inside the wall there was the private ownership of the interior community, outside the wall there was a public space of ideological understanding.

The “Song revolution” transformed the urban space, that originally belonged to the public sphere, into a specific public-private joint management of the streetscape. People living on both sides of the street engage in various activities at their doorsteps and on the street. The general daily necessities between neighbours can also be borrowed. If a resident is bored, he just has to go out and chat with his neighbours: there is basically no privacy on the streetside. In order to let the sun and fresh air enter the simple house, the door facing the street is always open, so that curious passers-by can also take a look at the physical scenery. People can walk to street stalls, teahouses, small shops and barber-shops in just a few steps. These places not only provide daily necessities, but they are also social interaction centres, where people exchange information: hairdressing shops are social and a good place to spread the gossip.

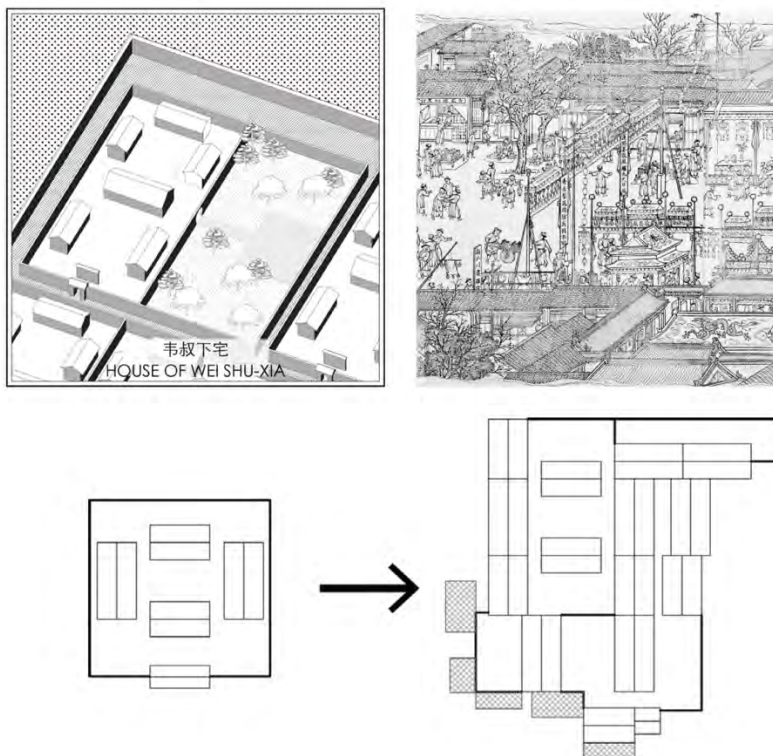


Fig. 09 - The effects of the “urban revolution” with the opening of the wall precinct and the birth of the street-life, re-elaborated by ZHANG Yang

The social nature of the street space determines why it can become a daily public space. In Asian culture, people prefer a relatively narrow street as a place for public communication compared to an open square. There is a commonality in the outdoor space, and the exterior walls of the houses on both sides of the street provide a relatively good privacy space. Therefore, it has become the fastest place for information circulation, and pedestrians have become the medium of information exchange process of strengthening the centralization of power prompted the ancient Chinese urbanization had an unprecedented momentum under the appearance of freedom.

In addition to public interaction activities, the most important and crucial part of the new urban culture, starting from the Song Dynasty, is the commercial activity on the street: ancient Chinese business flourishes and many shops fill the two sides of the streets, as it happens still nowadays (Fig. 10).

Different from the vertical development of European cities, the traditional Chinese houses usually have only one or two floors. The inner courtyard and the outer street separated by a wall make the daily life of the residents closely related to the commercial activities.



Fig. 10 - Shops and cycle/pedestrian city in DiaoYuTai Area, Nanjing

Another very important point of the so called “Shijing” culture is the community public activities. In Chinese, “street” is often associated with other characters to form other words, such as “jie fang”, “s” and so on. This is linked to the neighborhood and clan communities that are centered on the street. “She”, 社, or the community” as a social group has two basic meanings: in ancient times, community was the place where the gods of the land were sacrificed, later and today, the community is an organized structure. The meaning of the two concepts together developed into the “social” and the “community”. The interpretation of community as a clan is because the traditional way of living in China is mostly family gathering): festivals such as sacrifices, Chinese New Year, weddings, funerals, and the birth of children are all presented through the streets. For example, running water seats, dancing dragons and lions, welcoming relatives, and going out.

The best representation of the vivid idea of the Chinese street-life as a streetscape, still very useful also to understand the role of the streets in nowadays urban China is the roll entitled “Along the River During the Qingming Festival”.

It is a painting by the Song Dynasty artist Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145). It captures the daily life of people and the landscape of the capital, Bianjing, today’s Kaifeng, from the Northern Song period. This painting shows the great changes the urban structure and landscape had with the connection between the private and the public side of cities during the Song Dynasty.

The buildings were directly facing the street, whether it was houses, shops or even the religious facilities, which made the city truly had the open landscape. In this painting, there were no defending facilities in the city watchtower or fence on the street (at least on the first version of this painting).

This painting shows the urban structure and landscape that changed greatly after the collapse of the previous closed urban system. Whether it’s a home, a shop or even a religious facility, the building faces the street directly, giving you an open city view. In this painting, the shops along the street interface can be clearly seen or inferred a total of 33 buildings, including 5 hotels, 19 restaurants, which is more than 50% of the total sum of the shops, and all belong to the repast industry. There are 6 retail shops, 2 service shops such as pawn shop, and medical shops, and one woodwork workshop for making wheel. From the painting we can see that for different shops the openness to the street and public accessibility are different. Compared with Western architecture, ancient Chinese

architecture uses wood as the main building material and uses columns and beams as the main component. The joints are connected by mortise and tenon, which forms a flexible structure. On one hand, such wooden material makes building a free and open form, on the other hand, the limited interior space makes people have to move their living space, social and business activities outside their house to the street.

Transformation in the mode of living, the increase in population, the prosperity of the handicraft industry, all of these changes brought the economic development. The living environment transformed from the courtyard to miscellaneous. From the picture, we can clearly see that the shops with different functions are open to the street and the accessibility of the citizens is different.

There is a direction-oriented street-oriented shop. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, counter-style shops have more forms, parallel to the streets, perpendicular to the streets, corner counters and the streets form a rich inner and outer space and a varied commercial space.

The Qingyuan version of "Along the River During Qingming Festival" was drawn in the Qing Dynasty, the image is clearer and the architectural structure is more similar to the traditional dwellings of modern and contemporary China.

The ancient Chinese traditional space types can be divided into four spatial fields: management space, street space, market space and religious space, and residential space. The management space corresponds to the ruling body, that is, the space used by government activities. The street space is open to ordinary residents and has strong publicity. The commercial and street space includes shops and temporary stalls facing the streets and markets (being open and shared with ordinary residents, it has strong publicity).

Large-scale homes or gardens usually occupy a large area and are privately owned. Its street-facing interface can be divided into the form of commercial street and non-commercial street. On the interface of the non-commercial street, usually in addition to the entrance, it is basically a continuous wall, the interface form is simple. However, the interface on the commercial street will have shops along the street. These street shops are concentrated or scattered, usually owned and operated by the house or garden owner, and there are also cases where the merchants spontaneously build.

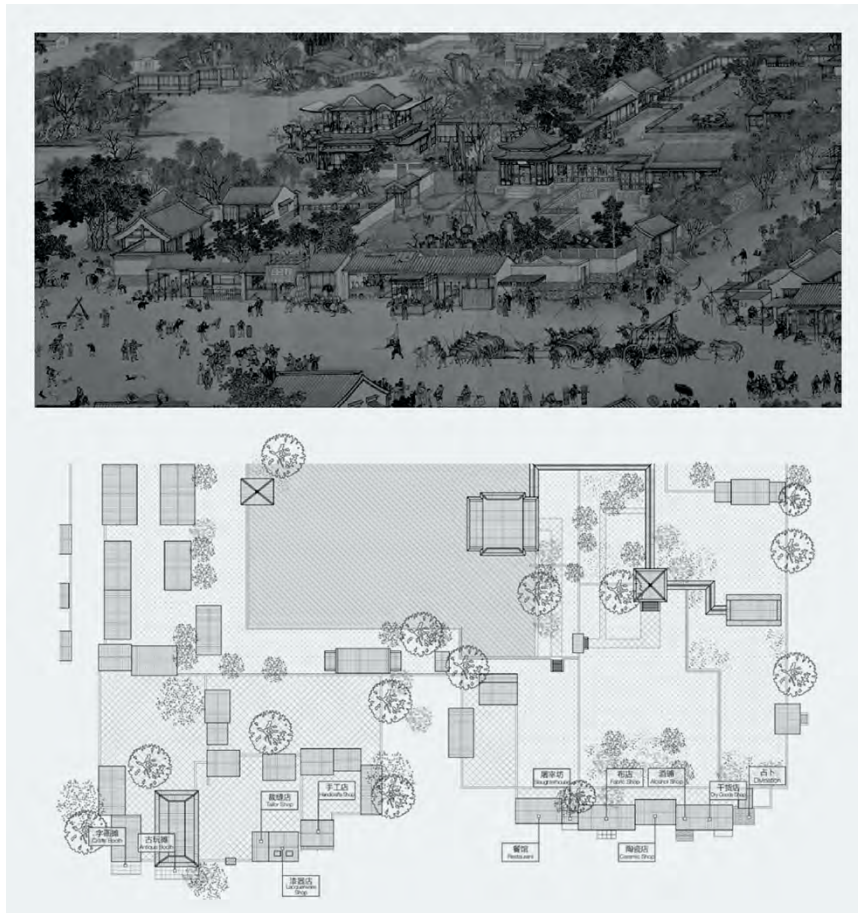


Fig. 11 - Shops along the street in the painted scroll “Along the River during Qingming Festival (graphic re-elaboration with the identification of shops), re-elaboration by ZHAN Yang from LIU, 2014

In the mixed area of residential and commercial streets, the shape of the shops along the street is basically to open some of the street, facing surfaces as shops based on the context of the original residential texture. There are many forms in which the house is open to the street. Some of them, open the courtyard door or wall, and the others are open the gable side of the building, the back of the inverted room to the street. Among them, residents spontaneously renovate their houses to carry out commercial activities, and also have adapted to commercial streets or the occupation and addition of space along the street.

In traditional Chinese urban morphology, the market space inside the neighbourhood is planned and residents are not allowed to carry out unofficial licensed commercial activities in the square. However, in this painting, after the Song Dynasty, the market space inside the neighbourhood was relatively free. Although there are still restrictions on the wall and the gate, there is no regular shape in the market space, which seems to be formed naturally. The city will be scattered or concentrated in the distribution of houses, as the

store faces the market space. Due to the limited size of the space, such houses are usually temporary sheds, mainly in the form of free markets for commercial activities.

Street corners are nodes that meet at the intersection of two or more streets and usually have strong commercial value. As can be seen from the figure, many street corners are composed of semi-permanent temporary structures such as the color gates, trees, pergola, parasols and booths.

Finally, the texture of ancient Chinese traditional cities is not homogeneous, and the scale of the buildings dominated by this land owner complicate the urban texture. Therefore, the isomorphism of the unit type and the non-homogeneity of the overall texture are typical features of the internal texture of ancient Chinese urban neighbourhoods.

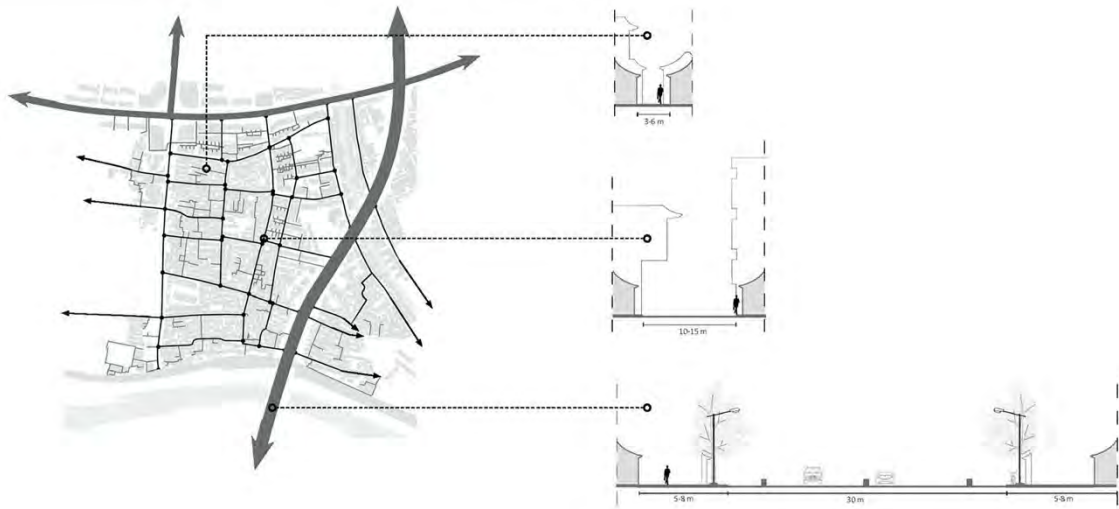


Fig. 12 - The nowadays complex system of streets' network in HeHuaTang Area: from the traditional alleys to the main traffic road

#### 4. A performative destiny

Through the above analysis, it is clear that, although most of the ancient Chinese cities were built once and for all through unified planning, in the process of use, with the gradual relaxation of regulations, the growth of the city began to deviate from the original ideal state. And the integration with the market culture creates a space that is more adapted to the living of the residents. The birth of the “Streetscape” in ancient China is linked with an idea of a scenic space that lasts until today, often in the backstage of the great freeways of the Asian metropolis.

Furthermore, due to the spontaneous aggression of residents, the formation and shape of many streets are passive, without considering the characteristics of street activities that they can accommodate. This is different from the ritual and functional public space in the West. But this tortuous, diverse and complex urban public space offers more possibilities for the public activities and expressions of feelings it can accommodate.

A street, on the one hand, maintains sufficient continuity, while on the other hand, the width changes, and after the mutation, the street continues to extend over the new width. This street node is a one-sided variable width node.

Although the spatial connection between the street and the street culture does not have a one-to-one correspondence, the occurrence of different street cultures is affected by the spatial form of the street nodes. Usually, street performances and some commercial activities will be chosen in places with good visibility, and the daily chills of residents will be carried out in a relatively invisible and relatively private space.