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*Original*

The commercial preservation of chinese heritage: a poisoned panacea for city modernisation / Cina', Giuseppe. - ELETTRONICO. - (2015), pp. 2038-2050. (Intervento presentato al convegno Aesop Annual Congress 2015 tenutosi a Prague nel 13-16 July 2015).

*Availability:*

This version is available at: 11583/2629145 since: 2016-01-25T20:12:08Z

*Publisher:*

CZECH TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY of Prague

*Published*

DOI:

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DEFINITE SPACE –

*FUZZY RESPONSIBILITY*

# BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS



13 – 16 JULY 2015, PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC  CZECH TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY

**Book of Proceedings AESOP Prague Annual Congress 2015**  
**Definite Space – Fuzzy Responsibility**

**Autor (editor):** Milan Macoun, Karel Maier (Ed.)

**Edited by:** České vysoké učení technické v Praze

**Prepared by:** Fakulta architektury

**Address:** Ústav prostorového plánování, Thákurova 9, 166 34 Praha 6

**Tel.:** +420 224 356 322

**Published:** only electronic version

**Number of pages:** 3495

ISBN 978-80-01-05782-7

## THE COMMERCIAL PRESERVATION OF CHINESE HERITAGE: A POISONED PANACEA FOR CITY MODERNISATION

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Keywords: heritage preservation in China, demolitions in China, urban planning in China

### Abstract

*In China the entertainment and tourism industry, united to heritage preservation, offers today an unmissable opportunity to increase the living standard of cities. To this end a systematic use of the demolition and reconstruction of vast historical areas became both the keystone of a development policy and the paradigm of a rudimentary culture of conservation at political and technical level. This paper proposes a reflection on the multiple causes of this phenomenon, from the most obvious (the strength of the housing market, the collusion between private and public interests) to the less evident: the opaqueness of land market, the subordination to political power, the conceptualization of heritage in the Chinese tradition.*

*To properly focus on the operational context of the demolition and reconstruction works in historic districts, the text compares some relevant aspects of the political system, the existing legislative framework and the technical tools adopted. Also, with reference to some significant operations the paper highlights how the demolition remains totally controlled by the real estate market and needs to be rethought as a political tool in order to target effective strategies of rehabilitation. In conclusion, the text highlights as in the process of preservation the field of action of the planners is extremely reduced, as operating within public boards strongly affected by a marked oriented policy and scarcely interacting with stakeholders external to the institutional power.*

### 1. To be or to seem, a difficult identity

Nowadays we are used to the everyday chronicle offering a vision of China as a place of great contradictions. A place where the huge scale of urban phenomena shows expressive codes that appear among the banality of the images that we think we understand and the complexity of their content. When observing the new developments we are bewildered as we are unable to understand the different meanings and values of the unvarying architecture marked by a played down post-modern style, which replaces a never achieved modern style. In fact it is not post-modern, but what the Chinese generically call the European style (*oulu feng*). We find it on the advertising towers of the headquarters of large companies where it attains its main expression as well as in the singular hybridizations with the local style and in the endless construction of 'modern houses with Chinese roofs', where the vernacular poetic is often reduced to being a faded crown that clashes with the rest of the building.

In historic areas, equally disconcerting are the vast *hutong* which appear perfectly refurbished with all the figurative stock of historical architecture. In fact, in almost all cases, it is not simply a matter of restoring or recovering historical buildings in various forms, but of new buildings reconstructed 'in style', which produce urban fabrics that do not constitute evolutionary stages of previous types but just their replacement with 'other' urban organisms.

Evidently in the two contexts of intervention, new and historic cities, various policies are implemented, corresponding to two different systems of intervention (in terms of legal framework, technical and managerial tools, actors involved). However, there are strong similarities of important aspects concerning the planning, management and implementation in the two systems (Abramson, 1997; Zhang and Fang, 2004). This is so evident that it seems that the same political and productive machine

is mastering the two processes of city transformation so that they are mainly distinguishable for their figurative outcomes rather than for their specific social and spatial contexts: in the first case the buildings are made in global style and in the second they are in Chinese style. On one hand the buildings are competing at the level of international poetics, while on the other hand they perform the figurative repertoire of historical identity which is seldom truthful. Paradoxically, the use of identity takes place according to a procedure that is similar to the construction of the Florentia Village in Wuqing, Pudong-Shanghai and Foshan-Guangzhou, the largest village-malls of China, where the historic city, stripped of all pretense of identity, assumes brazen connotations.

The condemnation of the destructive fury that wiped out most of the witnesses of a millennial history in less than half a century, by replacing it with a simplified interpretation in many cases, is now widespread at global level. Yet how can such a deep manipulation of the reality of ancient cities be possible, despite the complaints of such a large number of Chinese and foreign professionals and intellectuals?<sup>1</sup> Are only politics responsible for it or are there other reasons? It is hard to find an answer to such a complex question. Certainly a better understanding of the phenomenon could help to correct its distortions. To this end, I think it is useful, with reference to the historic city, to carry out an indepth analysis of a crucial aspect which better understanding could help us to address preservation policies more effectively: the practice of demolition.

Once carried out on a large scale and with surgical rigor, demolition allowed for the systematic deletion of vast historic areas paving the way to the epic of the forced modernization of last decades. It is obvious that its meaning goes beyond mere instrumental function. As observed in countless cases of major urban transformation, from the Pruitt-Igoe housing in St. Louis (mid 1970s) to the Bijlmermeer district of Amsterdam (1990s), demolition is at the heart of the most complex urban strategies where destruction and demolition can be considered as a 'natural process', as something creative" that contributes to urban construction (Thomsen, Schultmann, Kohler, 2011, p.328). Therefore it is worth asking oneself, even in the case of the historical city of China: How can public policies (financial and legislative) be designed to support the practices of deconstruction and recycling as a public 'good' without negatively impacting on the loss of building stock (Thomsen, Schultmann, Kohler, 2011, p. 329) and its cultural value?.

## 2. Marketing the past

The practice of demolition with reconstruction can be considered the paradigm of the immature conservative practice now present in China at political, cultural and technical level.

As a matter of fact demolitions have never been a shocking problem. Only in Beijing, in the second half of the last century, 22.5 km of city walls, 22 towers, dozens of residences and imperial parks were demolished. More than 2,000 temples, which were used as public spaces other than religious sanctuaries, were used for other purposes or demolished (China Heritage Project, 2005). In the same period the *hutong*, an outstanding embodiment of the road network defined during the Yuan Dynasty (XIII-XIV sec.), passed from 3,250 in 1949 to 1,400 in 2004 (Urban Planning Society of Beijing, 2005, p. 80), with many others condemned to demolition; in the two-year period from 2000 to 2002 more than 4.4 million square meters of historic homes were demolished (Cui, 2004). Yet again in 2002, 40% of the urban area included in the second belt of the historical walls (62.5 sq km) was demolished (China Heritage Project, 2005). This relentless process originated in the early years of the People's Republic foundation, when private property was confiscated and the related ownership regime was lost within an indefinite regulatory framework, which has remained the same in many cases.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the many battles against the demolition had as protagonists 24,000 homeholders joined under the leadership of the architect Fang Ke and the lawyer Wu Jianzhong. The latter was not afraid to tell to political leaders of his city: "Not even the Japanese invaders ravaged Beijing as you did" (Rampini, 2005, p. 61).

Demolitions are legal. They are empowered by the Constitution and ruled by several legislative acts<sup>2</sup>. In terms of planning tools, since the 1990s the most threatening legal mechanism which helps to justify large-scale looting for the historic city is the *Weigai*, i.e. the *Old and Dilapidated Housing Redevelopment Plans*.

These plans focus on interventions of urban regeneration that are not particularly related to historic centers but are suitable for the purposes of preservation. Indeed, thanks to their character of urgency it is easy to bypass the laws and the protection regulations.

As a consequence, the total area of traditional houses in the old Beijing decreased from 1,160 hectares in 1949 to approximately 500 hectares in 2005 (Whitehand and Gu, 2007, p. 650). It is estimated that in Beijing 221 *Weigai* plans involving nearly 1 million inhabitants were approved from 1993 to 2000, and that between 1990 and 1998 more than 4.2 million square meters of residences in the historic areas were demolished and reconstructed (Zhang and Fang 2004, p. 289).

The inhabitants are usually warned only a month before the arrival of the bulldozers by the inscription 'demolition' (*chai*) painted on the walls of the *hutong*. Theoretically, a part of the residents, established in the plans, are given the opportunity to return to the rehabilitated houses; but since displacements are mainly due to real estate development whose implementation is not subject to specific checks, people have to settle for meager compensation and seek alternative accommodation which is even more precarious than where they lived before (Cui, 2005; Sui, 2006).

In the case of Shanghai the side-effects of *Weigai* are even more relevant. It is estimated that from 1991 to 1997 22.5 million square meters of housing were demolished and over 1.5 million residents were transferred (Zhang, 2002).

These projects led to the replacement of entire neighborhoods, which affected both buildings deemed to be of little historic interest and buildings with considerable historic interest which are carefully reconstructed in order to reproduce their historic characteristics (Figure 1, 2). The few projects that attempt to implement a gradual redevelopment on demarcated areas succumb to the prevalence of major interventions supported by institutions. Basically, among the four building categories identified by Lv Zhou (2005, pp. 170-171) in the *hutong* of Beijing – i.e. (i) buildings under protection, (ii) buildings restored by private owners, (iii) traditional multifamily buildings, and (iv) new residential buildings – only the third, which is the most widespread, conservation policies do not acknowledge any value.

Among the most negative cases it is important to mention the major commercial areas of Liulichang (1980-85) and Wangfujing (1993-99), whose 'conservation' led to the widening of historic axes and the destruction and redesign of most of the building fabric. However the worst example of the last decade is the demolition and reconstruction of the Qianmen area south of Tiananmen Square (one of the 25 historical and cultural conservation areas identified in the master plan of 1991), which occurred during the preparation of the 2008 Olympic Games (Zhang and Zhao, 2009). This example demonstrates how at the top of the official recognition of the value of the historic city corresponds the greatest degree of destruction, even more than the anti-historical fury of the Cultural Revolution (Layton, 2007).

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<sup>2</sup> Rules on the right to land use, expropriation, compensation and demolitions are contained in the following acts: Law on soil Management, amended in 1998, Art. 58: "... the right to use land owned by the State can be revoked if one of the following circumstances is occurring: for public interest and to rebuild old neighborhoods in order to implement plans of urban construction ...."; Fourth Amendment to the Constitution of the PRC, in 2004: "For reasons of public interest, the government can expropriate (revoke) the right to the use of urban land and offer the right compensation according to the current laws and regulations"; Property Act, 2007, art. 42: "... the government can expropriate collectively owned land, the houses owned by entities or individuals on state-owned land and other immovable property"; Regulations on expropriation and compensation of housing on land owned by the State, three versions issued from 2010 to 2011.

In all cases demolition is considered to be an almost inescapable way of establishing a building site<sup>3</sup>. Consequently, 'urban demolition' (*cheng shi chai qian*) becomes a way of increase the stock of urban land, which is not available for development policies as long as it is occupied by dwellings for which people pay only a nominal rent.

The following 'conservative reconstruction' combines all possible images and styles of historic architecture, subjecting it to the purposes of the real estate market rather than to the issues of the true physical and social context. The result is a largely false housing, in which even in the rare cases where all the existing fabric is not demolished, you can not distinguish the original from imitation; furthermore, thanks to aggressive accreditation campaigns, this result is presented as a compensation in terms of public welfare compared to past conditions of backwardness. Therefore it is not by chance that the unfortunate affair of the *hutong* and *siheyuan*<sup>4</sup> (Figure 3, 4, 5) is one of the most popular themes in Chinese conservation literature (Geffroy, 2004).

In fact, here we are faced with the *invention of the memory* and the construction of a past that the country has never come to terms with after the trauma of the Cultural Revolution. It was not possible for China because it passed from that original trauma to the other triggered by the reforms of Deng in 1978. , Therefore one of China's biggest problems today is not having yet embarked on a path of reconciliation with its memory, the same path which once enabled Germany and South Africa to emerge from a tunnel of torn identity.

### 3. Demolition: many reasons, any project

At this point it is worth considering the genesis and forms that produce such an abnormal mystification of the concept and practice of conservation. There are many reasons behind this phenomenon of uncontrollable aggression but not all of them are referable to the most obvious such as the current political economic system, the strength of the real estate market and the collusion between private and public interests. Other reasons are associated to them which can be summarized as follows: (i) the need of local authorities to 'make money' by means of land value; (ii) the subordination of people to political power; (iii) the weak attachment of the inhabitants of the city centres to the place; (iv) the peculiar conceptualization of heritage in Chinese tradition.

The first reason depends on the chronic lack of resources from the State coffers and local authorities due to the huge amount of public works carried out since the advent of the People's Republic in 1949. In those years, the demolition of the historic walls, as well as a distorted political vision, was accelerated by the shortage of building materials: the walls were actually a mine of building materials (Lu, 2011). With the reforms of Deng and the introduction of the dual land regime – relating to the ownership (of State or rural communities) and use (private, public or mixed) - the value of land increased enormously and land marketing became one of the most lucrative segments of the economic cycle of the present socialist market (Shin, 2009)<sup>5</sup>. Today the sale of land, made possible by the forced

<sup>3</sup> The same method concerned modern housing districts to a greater extent as they became quickly obsolete and free from the restrictions for historic areas. Rehabilitation hardly ever matters but demolition and reconstruction are now in the third generation (1950s, 1980s, 2010s).

<sup>4</sup> A *hutong* is a road or alleyway mostly present in Beijing and northern Chinese cities, that gives the name to the urban district it serves. A *siheyuan* is a traditional courtyard house with one or two elevations which opens onto a *hutong*.

<sup>5</sup> The Constitution of the Republic of China states (art. 10): «The urban land belongs to the State. The rural and suburban land belongs to the rural communities, except the parts of national interest belonging to the State. The houses and agricultural land relating to private use belong to the rural communities. The State can expropriate land for public interest according the laws, giving a compensation to the owners. To any institution or person is forbidden to occupy, sell, buy or transfer

expulsion of the inhabitants, has become the main source of revenue of local authorities. Its high income potential and the fact that the managers of local authorities can earn money in both a legitimate (by benefits linked to productive operations) or an illegal (by collusion) way, results in a land market that does not meet obstacles even in historic areas, where entrepreneurs can demolish everything except for a limited number of listed monuments.

The second reason is due to the relationship between people and power and the civic culture that corresponds to it. The inhabitants put up with the decisions of the policy makers with resigned acceptance and do not have the strength to oppose such a threatening and unimpeachable power. Some regulations require that plans are subject to publication and public consultations before approval, such as the Law concerning urban and rural planning (arts. 26 and 46, 2007) and the Ordinance for the preservation of historic cities and towns (2008), yet they have no real cogency (Li, 2013).

However, the conflict over the right of residents to stay in their own home is the issue that mostly affects the inhabitants and power<sup>6</sup>. Although this topic is under a specific legislation, reported by the media and the subject of a number of studies (Davis, 2004; Li, 2013), it always ends up in the same way: in front of a solid cross-alliance between local authorities and real estate developers for managing and implementing new developments, the inhabitants are isolated and without bargaining power (Wu, 2012).

Even the 'Community of the inhabitants', an administrative body working at the level of individual municipal districts helps to bridge this gap. Instead of representing the civil society or social groups involved in a bottom-up process, it is indeed limited to functions that are fully dependent on local government and plays an administrative role of social control (Bray, 2006).

There are some proposals to put an end to this situation as to increase the compensation rate for the evicted inhabitants and to promote citizen participation through an effective application of laws. Meanwhile there are more and more protests and some people, like John Friedman, even see a significant growth of civil society (Walcott, 2007). Nevertheless, the silence of the inhabitants finally prevails, unable to stem the disruptive mercantilism of urban policies (Cui, 2005).

The third reason is related to the phenomenon of the weak social roots of the inhabitants. If urban growth has not fully spread out into the endless suburbs and since the advent of the People's Republic has been overflowing in the heart of the city, it is due to the fact that the city had to act as a clearing house in order to cope with the large migrations from and to the countryside caused by the traumatic development policies of the last fifty years. This has meant that different and unstable populations have significantly changed the cities without maturing a strong sense of belonging. Two other factors are responsible for this incomplete maturation: the inhabitants' uncertainty regarding the workplace and the future of work itself. Moreover, the fact that the most of the housing is still owned by the State, which permits people to inhabit the houses but may want them back (for example for the implementation of a *Weigai*), has discouraged people from investing in them both materially and emotionally.

In this vacuum of stakeholders and identities the nouveau riche have an easy game to play in occupying the valuable areas of the center, flanked by disinformation campaigns that convey a narrative of the protection in a purely commercial way.

Apart from the three well recognizable reasons above mentioned, and as such subject to quite strong social conflicts, there is a fourth less evident but not less important: the reason linked to the particular conceptualization of heritage buildings according to Chinese tradition. In order to discuss this point it is important to note that the idea of cultural property established in the World Heritage Convention

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illegally the possession of the land. The land right of use may be transferred according to the laws. Any institution or person is required to use the land in a rational way».

<sup>6</sup> Forced evictions are common in rural areas and are a great source of conflict and public protest. According to some projections, up to 65 percent of the 180,000 annual 'mass incidents' in China derive from the opposition to forced evictions (*Forced evictions in China*, Wikipedia).



(WHC, insofar) (UNESCO, 1972) cannot have a universal consensus. In fact the concepts of historical heritage and identity that are stated in the WHL, are differently conceived in the various cultural basins and this leads to significant consequences.

Europeans, as Augustin Berque (2007) underlines, are in favour of protecting historical assets in their materiality, while China prefers the conservation of witnessing aspects: in fact, it is argued that these latter are able to objectify the contents of a historical asset rather than the historical asset in its original physicality. In this sense, paradoxically from a western point of view, a painting of the Qing Dynasty has more value if it is endowed with a comment by a famous intellectual or important politician written on it.

In particular, in China «... the preservation of material forms is not important. It is for that reason that the Chinese can destroy so easily those built forms which, in Europe, would be preciously preserved, or, by the same token, can build new ones with no consideration for what the Europeans would call authenticity», i.e. that of the original matter (Berque, 2007, p. 7).

Having said that, we do not want to affirm that the different conceptualization of cultural heritage in China explains and justifies the current destructive tendencies, but just that a certain habit to the ordinariness of the demolition and reconstruction of historic buildings, associated with traditional practices and rituals, it might have made it less reprehensible. Demolition cannot have appeared to be in sharp contradiction with the culture of conservation especially in the case of small-scale interventions and ordinary urban fabric.,.

Moreover, it is worth noting that in China the cultural value of a historic asset is recognised primarily at institutional level. In China the process of application for admitting a cultural heritage to the WHL is certainly not managed by local players, as recently occurred for the Vineyard Landscape of Piedmont: Langhe-Roero and Monferrato (Italy), but originates from a central government policy which is strongly related to turistic development. Therefore when the inhabitants of the historic town demand a best quality of life in the *hutong* and the functional improvement of the courtyard houses, instead of their reconstruction, they make a request concerning a cultural value without official recognition and succumb to the market forces: an example of this is represented by the case of the Plan of Conservation and Development of Nanluoguxiang in Beijing (2006-2020) (Shin, 2010).

#### **4. Aporias and practices of reconstruction**

At this point, if the lens of cultural relativism acknowledges some kind of historical foundation to the practice of demolition and reconstruction, under what conditions is it still admissible? In order to approach this question let us start by referring to two temporal levels, the past and the present: in other words, before and after the official designation of the buildings and properties of cultural value as heritage to be protected.

In the past, when referring to buildings of recognized cultural value and public interest, whether they were civil or religious, with a stable typology and function over time, demolition-reconstruction was ensuring the transmission of the property (or asset) and its meanings at two levels: by fully restoring it returning to its physical constitution (as a no longer original building yet identical to the original) and by the permanence of its function. The operation was meaningful for the intimate coexistence of form and function, of a stable form over time associated to an immanent and historical function which is considered as the primary content legitimizing the meaning and value of the property (or asset). The buildings affected by these practices were not identified according to selective criteria but simply inherited by tradition. What today appears to be an ambiguous form of conservation / modification was then justified by a common feeling entirely coherent with the maintenance of that tradition.

If we come to the present, with the advent of legislation on this matter, we can schematically distinguish two levels: formally recognized assets of historical and cultural value and assets with less or no official recognition.

With the exception of few cases, the first level includes buildings whose modes and objectives of conservation assume that the physical constitution of the buildings is restored or reproduced by imitating the original (but with typology, materials and technologies that may differ from the original) and that the existing functions can be changed.

This is the case of the buildings in the Forbidden City in Beijing. There the process of reconstruction loses any ritual/traditional meaning since the function, the primary expression of the continuity of their value over time, is now a touristic function: in fact, a profound and objective transformation took place. Once the functions of the buildings 'recovered' by reconstruction changed, their testimonial character was merely allusive. Moreover, reconstruction is often no longer philological but falsified – by new materials and techniques – and is oriented towards reproducing a vision of national identity subject to tourism interests.

Another problematic case was the reconstruction of the gate (and tower) of Yongdingmen in Beijing in 2004, situated to the south of the historical axis of the Ming dynasty. The gate, which was the largest gate in ancient Beijing, was erected in 1553 and then demolished in 1957 under Maoist urban modernization. Its recent reconstruction is supposed to follow the principle of the replica of the original, by using the same materials and techniques. Yet, with the aim of reviving the 7.8 km of the long city axis, which has been freed of the structures that were interrupting its perspective, the gate was not rebuilt in its original place!

An even more striking and common example is the Yellow Crane Tower in Wuhan. The building is one of the four Great Towers of China, built in 223 (Three Kingdoms period), and has been restored or rebuilt 10 times. The last time it was rebuilt using modern materials and with the addition of a lift in 1985, but on a hill situated in the city center one kilometer from its original site. Today it is 15 meters wider, it has 2 floors more than the original 3 and offers visitors an amazing view of the city and the Yangtze River. Nevertheless, regardless of its authenticity, it is considered the same tower which was sung in the poems written by the poet Cui Hao in the eighth century.

Did its reconstruction follow the principles of tradition or not? I think we can answer yes up to the penultimate reconstruction, while concerning the last reconstruction (1985), which was unacceptable from a western point of view, I think that the case is more complex even from a Chinese point of view. In order to evaluate the matter we should better understand many aspects of cultural context which is not an easy task for a foreigner. In fact identity is an issue that affects not only the property (or asset) in itself but also the ways in which it is identified and recognized by various social bodies, by the various representatives and groups with political and institutional power; but unfortunately little is known about this aspect.

However, it is reasonable to state that in order to be deemed conservative or not, an intervention must comply with at least two criteria: that it does not modify the cultural and historical values of the property, and that the economic management of the operation is carried out firstly according to public interest. In the past the traditional practices of reconstruction were controlled by those who were entitled to ensure the continuity of functions, whether they were monks or government officials; and the same techniques and materials of construction were adopted. On the contrary today's practices lead to the erection of buildings which are dissimilar in their physical components and functions, therefore how can they be considered as being conservative?

There is much debate on this issue and the Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China (China ICOMOS, 2002) could represent a basic reference for it. Yet there is a problem, the ICOMOS China is managed by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (*guojia wenwu ju*), which reports to the Ministry of Culture. Consequently, unlike the Burra Charter (on which these Principles are based), which was developed by a NGO and is open to the debate among individual or associated experts, in this case the principles are defined by an institutional body and experts who are not

employed by the administration are not allowed to participate: it turns out the dominant role of the State in the decision-making procedures of conservation (Qian, 2007)<sup>7</sup>.

It follows that a reflection on this matter is lacking (few people know of the existence of the Principles of ICOMOS China) and that the debate on conservation prefers to deal with other issues as those cultural tourism (Leah et al., 2008; Li and Hou, 2011; Wang and Bramwell, 2012).

On observing the second level, that is the buildings whose value is approximately or not at all recognized (the most prevalent category in historic areas), we find that interventions that affect them are not defined according to their objective attributes of quality, which are actually overlooked, but on the economic return that they can provide. This attitude leads to the modification of those parts, whether they are big or small, built or un-built, that contrast with this goal. The traditional market streets belong to this category, as they are usually widened to build more attractive shopping malls and private residences.

The transformation of the latter is facilitated by a particular condition: the interventions required to provide a functional updating of the dwellings according to new living standards has become the Trojan horse of reconstruction.

This fact goes against the *siheyuan*, i.e. that architectural unit that straddles between noble and ordinary architecture, thus marking out the building fabric of the Chinese city. In its buildings as in its gardens calligraphic compositions, decorations, floral elements and furniture are distributed, through which the owners passed down family anecdotes and traditional Chinese stories. They are narratives and metaphors whose meanings can only be fully understood by an increasingly smaller number of people. These narratives should be preserved together with the built asset but unfortunately they are deleted in the context of fast reconstruction. Therefore in this case, despite the maintenance of the residential function, the delicate complexity of signs and meanings of memory disappear. (Lev, 2005). However, there are significant experiences that have attempted to reverse this approach, by assigning a key role to the maintenance of existing historic fabric within the cultural and social sustainability of preservation: they all refer to projects and actions supported at international level. Among these the intervention for the rehabilitation of the sector of Wenhuali in the historic center of Yangzhou can be cited as an exemplary case, which was implemented by GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit). The project, funded by GTZ and based on a participatory implementation which overcame significant initial resistance, proved to be very successful, thus establishing itself as a widely repeatable process and method (GTZ, YMG, 2007). Regrettably, the same administration of Yangzhou, which continued the work on the area of Dongguan, betrayed this approach by using renewal measures based on tourism and real estate development, resulting in a commercial, completely rebuilt building fabric and in the displacement of the original inhabitants and traders: once again a top-down process planned and managed by the government and implemented by a real estate company owned by the same government (Li, 2013).

## 5. Conclusions

The reflection presented in this study was carried out in respect to certain aspects that appear relevant in relation to the political context, the regulatory system and the technical tools as well as to certain operations implemented in the historic city. The main issues observed can be summarized as follows:

- In China, the policy of conservation is based on the initiatives of only institutional bodies. It is established on a rigid yet adaptable legal framework, in which it is difficult to distinguish between declarations of principles, objectives, permissions and prohibitions. As such, it does not unequivocally

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<sup>7</sup> These limits are worsened by a conservation conceived only in relation to monuments and monumental sites, nonetheless moveable if required by important national developments: "... when a major development project of National importance is undertaken and relocation is the sum of means of saving elements of a site may they be moved in their historic condition " (Principles ..., art. 18).

address the various components of the protection system (i.e. political, administrative, social, real estate-oriented and so on), and it paves the way to error and manipulation legitimating a not transparent governance of the preservation policy.

- The backwardness of the intervention modes proposed in the various recovery tools corresponds to an insufficient maturation of a specific technical culture. Analysis describing the context to preserve with adequate cognitive frameworks concerning the physical, functional, economic and social aspects is lacking and a theory that puts land use and urban fabrics in accordance with the conditions of their transformation is required. The usual methodology of intervention, bare-bones, gives way to the reconstruction of a historical urban set where it is difficult to distinguish true from false.
- In a cultural context where traditionally the historical properties are recovered by means of the reconstruction method, neither a restoration theory nor a method of recovering at urban scale have been developed. However, in the light of current conditions, the traditional approach is no longer valid. The country is therefore encouraged to update the meaning and vision of cultural heritage together with the relative policies.
- At various levels of government there is little intention to involve the local social forces in the conservation plans. This is reflected by the low consideration of both the players in the field and the conditions of transformation, which gives a huge operational power to demolition with reconstruction and results in the space being used in rough and speculative ways. Therefore it comes a political short-circuit: if there is no increase in the bottom up dynamics, it will not be possible to stimulate a review of government preservation policy; on the other hand, if there is not a significant development of bottom up initiatives there will not be openness in government policies.
- The widespread practice of demolition is also the result of an incomplete maturation of the complexity of history and forms of identity: China still has to come to terms with its history, which was denied during the Maoist era and left on the shelf during the decades that followed.

In conclusion, a revision of the current destructive approach is not sufficient for addressing the main issues of providing new meanings and functions for Chinese historic cities. A more comprehensive discipline of conservation as well as a more far-sighted vision of the future of the cities is required. A vision that is able to properly legitimate the reasons, objectives, forms and contexts of demolition, ranging from urban restructuring, such as that of the *artiste démolisseur* Haussmann, to the removal of accretions in the plans of Cervellati in Italy. In fact the issue of demolition is so multifaceted that the relative problems can be only solved by means of an interdisciplinary approach. In other words, demolition must be conceived as an instrument of a political action, which is able to address specific strategies for the enhancement and development of historic assets, which must be saved from political ideology and pure real estate market.

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1. Hutong north of Beihai Lake. The area was totally demolished to rebuild a commercial district. (photo Marlène Leroux)





2. Luo Guo Hutong before its transformation in a commercial street. This Hutong has been renovated step by step following the market opportunities. The original function changed, the population moved out, architecture has been distorted; yet some traces still remain like old doors, some architectural elements and the original dimension of the street. (photo Marlène Leroux)



3. Gateway of a Siheyuan in a Hutong. (photo Marlène Leroux)





4. Courtyard of a Siheyuan partially preserved in Houhai area in Beijing. (photo Feng Wei)



5. Courtyard of a Siheyuan filled with various small extensions that meet the growing needs of living space for more dwellers. (photo Marlène Leroux)

