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Street Lives in Ancient Chinese Capital

City

Based on the Painting of Along the River During the Qingming Festival

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Synopsis

Street is a key public space in the city, representing and being influenced at the same time by different history and culture of a country, city or region. This research is inside the team of “Transitional Morphologies Research Unit” (Politecnico di Torino and Southeast University Nanjing), by introducing local languages and customs from the perspective of Chinese, tries to explain the effect to the streets in an ancient Chinese capital city by residents’ daily life, especially the conception and behaviour. Analyses are not only based on iconology, typology and morphology, but also cultural anthropology and ethnography, aiming to provide a different view of Chinese urban streets. Facing the contemporary identity crisis of Chinese traditional settlements, the work contributes to take the edge of cultural gaps in urban heritage and planning.

Key words: Public Space, Chinese Traditional Settlement, Urban Heritage.

1. Street, as a Public Space

Streets are, in broad terms, the public and democratic space of the city. Furthermore, “streets that cater to the daily functional, social, and leisure needs of people have been positively associated with economic growth, physical health, and a sense of community” (Vikas Mehta, 2013). Public space, which is one of the most important aspects for residential life, should not be neglected during the protection and reconstruction process of historical and cultural settlements.

1.1. Street: A Space of Identity

“For urban morphologists, it is widely accepted that cities must change, one of the key problems is how to cope with these changes while retaining older areas and structures in which past generations have invested so heavily” (Vitor Oliveira, 2016). Under the contemporary conditions of urban design “the character of the new architecture (...) cannot be the neo-international style of most of the contemporary Asian architecture” (Marco Trisciuglio, 2017). In recent years, the increasing and impending need for the architectural theory was linked with “The overwhelming expansion of Chinese cities” (Shiqiao Li, 2014). The question of ‘identity’ should also be under consideration, in order to evaluate the most appropriate architectural forms in the urban heritage settlements of Chinese city.

Scholars nowadays are focusing on the historical traces in urban area, which can recall the memories of ancient cities. However, in reality, “the Chinese urban ‘street’ can be defined as the ‘street culture’ of a traditional city in the context of the contemporary city” (Shi Jian, 2008) which contributes to the attraction of a city.

1.2. Transition of the Chinese street

The macroscopic forms of the ancient Chinese city layout and space mainly reflected the will of the ritual system and rulers. On the micro level, many specific features of ancient Chinese cities reflect the long-term and slow evolution of the city caused by changes in daily life. The “layout of symmetry, centrality and concentricity symbolizing the position of the throne, is in fact related to a space of hierarchical domination of the throne in social and political transactions” (Jianfei Zhu, 2003).

In terms of urban development in Chinese history, starting from the Northern Song Dynasty, the boundary between residential areas and commercial areas are completely broken. Shops can be set up on the street instead of taking part in a centralized and closed area. From then on, the street scale evolution has been strongly linked with the public space nowadays.

2. Reading Paintings: An Interpretation of Street Lives

Although, morphology and typology are widely used in the study of urban heritage, the research about urban space can also be based upon comparing

iconographic studies read and treated in a comparative way. The street lives presented in paintings are able to “show a fresh diversity” (Blundell Jones, 2002). Here, for example, details are extracted from *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* [清明上河圖], which is describing the daily life along a river of Bianliang, the capital of China in Song dynasty (Fig. 1), to do a comparative study with the painting *The Effects of Good and bad Government* (Fig. 2), which is also a very iconic and represent an official record of street lives.



Figure 1. Zhang Zeduan, *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* [清明上河圖], painted scroll (24,8x528 cm), Source: The Palace Museum, Beijing, Song dynasty (1085–1145).



Figure 2. Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *The Effects of Good and bad Government*, Source: Salon of Nine or Council Room in the Town Hall (Palazzo Pubblico), Siena, 1338-1339.

This kind of typical official pictures helps us to reconstruct a lively street area with a strong scenography effect. The shape and size of urban streets are depicted with abundant folk activities and specific details of courtyards and housing. Moreover, the public spatial nodes, such as corners and squares, are occupied by local markets, street foods and festival celebrations.

But which cannot be ignored is the motivation of covering negative influence for the Chinese ancient government, that means, inner essence should be read cautiously. Meanwhile, discussing “the sense of presence”, Tilley wrote: “it cannot be known or understood simply from publications, from maps, diagrams, photographs and descriptions, because these are only representations. As representations they necessarily fail to convey a bodily understanding of prehistoric remains” (Christopher Tilley, 2004).

3. Different Conceptions towards Public Space

The comparative study has introduced several questions as following, “How does this strange mixing up of ‘the lawful and the human, the objective and the subjective’ (Duan Jin, 2016) effect architectural forms?”, “What are the definitions of ‘public’ against ‘private’, according to western and eastern cultures?”.

The capital plan of Nanjing (1929), including several projects like Nanjing Jinling Women's University, which were designed by an American architect Henry Murphy, is a good example to show the misunderstandings of western architect towards public spaces in Chinese city.

4. Research Objective

As Rem Koolhaas said, “without cross-border, there is no innovation”. The hearsay and cultural prejudice are the main reasons why Western architects misunderstand China’s architectural design and culture. Overall, the aim is to explore the applicability of Western urban design concepts to Chinese traditional settlements and provide a framework of reference for assessing urban heritage and renewal. The anthropologic approach to the study of the dynamics of urban development, in Asia as well as in Europe, can be a great starting point for a new season of urban design, fruitful and respectful of cultures and traditions.

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Biography

Xiaoxu Liang is a Ph.D candidate in program "ARCHITETTURA. STORIA E PROGETTO" in architecture and design department of Politecnico di Torino(2017). She holds a master degree in rural and urban design of North China University of Technology(2016). Since 2013 she has been undertaking research features of vernacular house in rural area of Hebei(China) and published 4 papers on this topic. She has taken part in some projects in China, mainly focused on residential projects.