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Urban Redevelopment and Revitalisation. A Multidisciplinary Perspective

6th June – 11th September 2022, Łódź–Kraków

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From Iconographies to Morphologies. An Overview on European and Chinese Urban Forms through 10 Images

Abstract A recurring misunderstanding pushes Western architects to transfer the images, the uses and the symbols of European cities' spaces to projects located into the Chinese cities, that in reality show different and specific images, uses and symbols in their own urban spaces: the idea of the Western square as a place of individual interplay, able to create the 'society', cannot work in the same way in China, where the role of the street as the place of the family life and the urban community's awareness cannot find a correspondent in Europe.
The 'Transitional Morphologies' Joint Research Unit (at Southeast University and Politecnico di Torino from 2018) operates on the formal analysis of the dynamics in urban form between Asia and Europe in order to improve the design practice through new technical and conceptual tools and often adopting comparative methods.
The aim of the paper is to describe the methodology, the contents and the outcomes of a comparative research activity developed by the Author within the context of the Joint Research Unit in the last seven years (2015–2021) in Nanjing, at SEU School of Architecture.

Keywords Chinese Urban Form, Chinese Urban Culture, Chinese Urban Morphologies.

Introduction and Background

The starting question of the work was explaining how urban morphology and iconographic studies on urban contexts can collaborate in order to map the features of urban spaces in different cultures, even adopting comparative methods for analyzing. The original plan consisted in describing the form, the size and the use of 'urban spaces' in the European City, as well as in the Chinese one, through a diachronic sequence of ten images (from the Middle Ages until today).

The methodology adopted consisted in showing an image (often a painting or a fresco, but also a photograph or a photogram or a drawing) of a specific and well known European urban landscape and analyzing it in detail, recalling similar images and similar spaces or study cases in Asia.

The 10 Western study cases are:

1. the rising of the Italian City in the 'Effects of Good Government' (by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in Siena 1338);
2. the invention of perspective in one of the three panels showing the *Ideal City* (the one now in Baltimora, maybe by Fra' Carnevale 1484);
3. the life, reality and atmosphere of an ordinary European City considering 'View of Delft' (by Jan Vermeer 1661);
4. the urban design as *drama* in the engrave 'View of the Basilica of St. Peter`s Square at the Vatican' in Rome (by Giovanni Battista Piranesi 1740);
5. the rules and the invention's interplay (or the logic of composition) demonstrated by the so-called 'Palladian Building's 'capriccio' (by Canaletto 1759);
6. the perception of the modern city in 'The Carnival in Boulevard des Capucines' (by Claude Monet 1873);
7. the industrial city in 'Periphery' (by Mario Sironi 1920);
8. the urban space described 'into a camera' as 'The Kiss in Front of City Hall Paris' (by Robert Doisneau 1950);
9. the complexity and the contradiction in the contemporary city through 'Wings of Desire [The sky upon Berlin]' (the movie by Wim Wenders 1987);
10. the dystopian city between science fiction, comics and contemporary urban space told by the 'Incal's' city (by Moebius and Alexander Jodorowsky 1981–1988).

Methodology

Through the sequence of the 10 study cases, it is possible to tell the story of the development of urban forms in the development European urban culture: from the spontaneous settlement of citizens (rich of symbolic and social values) to the idea of the city as a geometric project, from the role of merchants and communities in creating urban spaces to the rhetoric idea of the city as a theatre's *scena*, from the image of the city as a collection of objects lead by designers' phantasy to the 'technical flows' (and vertical) city at the end of 19th Century, from the industrial city made by factories and chimneys and roads to the realistic city portrayed by a camera as it were a document, from the attention of movies towards the contemporary cities (its complexity and its contradictions) to the comics and science fiction glazes towards the future of the city.

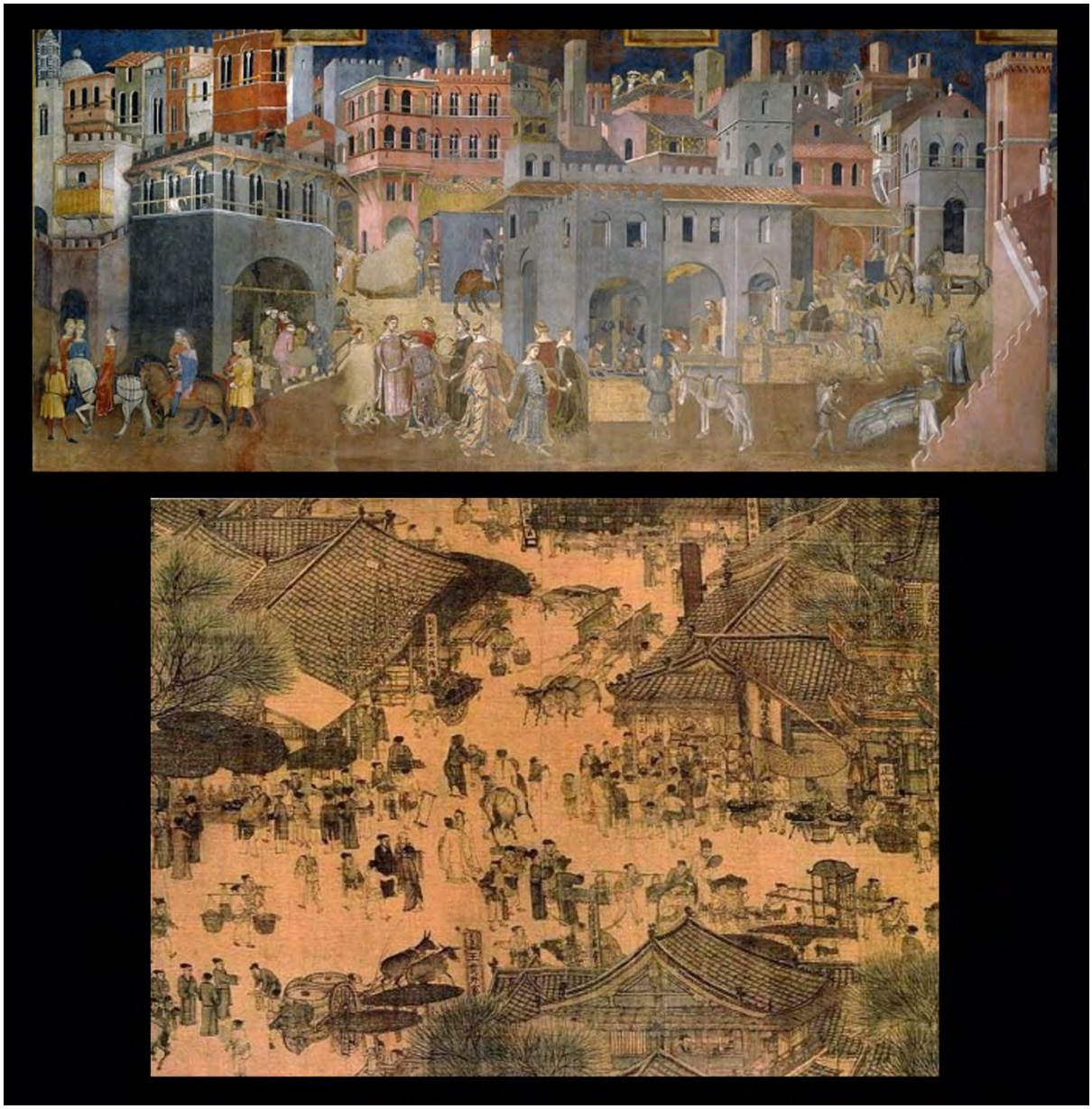

Figure 1. The Effects of Good Government (by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in Siena, 1338) and Along the River During the Qingming Festival (清明上河图, Qingming Shanghe Tu, by ZHANG Zeduan, Song Dynasty): comparison between details
Source: Ambrogio Lorenzetti 1338, Zhang Zeduan, Song Dynasty.

All the 10 examples are part of the imaginary of Western scholars and ordinary people. The 10 steps of the sequence are emblematic of a specific phase in the historical development of urban form (as topic for urban morphologists' studies and research).

However, from a comparative point of view, what is important and interesting is finding a series of 10 images, coming from the Chinese culture, able to describe, in parallel with the 10 Western ones an analogue sequence or, at least, a list of other 10 study cases that could show either analogies or differences with the starting list.

Figure 2. The Atlas with the sequence of the 10 Western images
Source: author's own work.

Results and Discussion

1.

Around two centuries before the fresco by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, during the Song Dynasty, Zhang Zeduan painted his 'Along the River During the Qingming Festival' (清明上河图, 'Qingming Shanghe Tu'). It is a scroll, 25.5 centimeters high and 5.25 meters long, describing the activities of common people in a Celebration Day (or maybe just a sunny and brilliant day) in the ancient city of Bianjing (today Kaifeng in Henan).

Watching that scroll, slowly and carefully, is like watching a movie, feeling to be part of an urban tale of the Chinese life of so many centuries: persons, animals, objects, jobs, houses, chariots and other vehicles. Any moments inside the city walls are portrayed as well as any moments in countryside. Some elements, like the market, the city gate and the great bridge are the Chinese antecedents of the fresco in Siena.

The main street, and not the main square, seems to be the most important urban space. Scholars counted the objects in the scroll and made the list: 814 humans, 28 boats, 60 animals, 30 buildings, 20 vehicles, 8 sedan chairs and 170 trees. But only about twenty women appear and only women of low social rank are visible out of doors unless accompanied by men.

There are several versions of that painting and, like in the play of tradition/transmission, every one changed (a little or a lot). The 'Suzhou Imitation' is a remake by a Suzhou workshop artist of the Ming dynasty, the 'Qingming in Ease and Simplicity' was a remake by an unknown artist of the Ming dynasty, while the 'Qing Court Version' is an 18th-century remake by the collaborative effort of the Qing court artists Chen Mei, Sun Hu, Jin Kun, Dai Hong, and Cheng Zhidao. Another18th-century remake is due to Shen Yuan.

Figure 3. The Atlas with the sequence of the 10 Chinese images
Source: by the author's own work.

2.

In 'Sanlitu Jizhu' (part 1, vol. 4), book on various Confucian rituals, finished in 962, at the beginning of the Song Dynasty, the description of the ideal form of the Chinese capital cities (Wangcheng) was made with a picture that is very similar to some Roman, Persian, Egyptian, Assyrian pictures of the same topic: the city at the center of Universe.

A sharp description of the ideal form of Chinese capital cities can be found in a previous historical record called the Kaogongji (考工记), 'Record of Trades', or 'Records of Examination of Craftsman', or 'Book of Diverse Crafts or Artificers' Record', a classic work on science and technology in Ancient China, compiled towards the end of the Spring and Autumn period (from approximately 771 to 476 BC, first half of the Eastern Zhou period):

> The city is of nine li in square perimeter with three gates on each side, each gate opening to a broad avenue divided into three parallel ways, of which the middle one is for vehicles, the left for male pedestrians, and the right for female pedestrians, thus forming a square lattice within nine ways running from north to south and another nine from east to west. In the center of the city stands the imperial palace with the ancestral temple of the imperial family on its left and the She, or the Altar of the Earth, on its right. In front of the palace but still within the forbidden walls, is the imperial court while behind the Forbidden City lies the market (Anonymous 771 – 476 BC).

3.

European people of 16th century loved a lot Chinese porcelains, there was a very important global trading of them, so they tried to discover a way (the famous 'northwest passage') to reach China from a water road, passing through Canada and Bering Strait, in order to avoid the complicated trips along the Silk Road. Netherlanders were the greatest merchants of that century.

Within the *corpus* of the Vermeers' paintings, 'The View of Delft' and 'The Little Street' are just like the cover and the introduction to a collection of human tales. The artist generally painted the rooms of the houses of Delft, where the same golden light enters in the lives of women and men, describing, with a deep taste for detailing, all the materials and objects that are part of the life of human beings: a lacemaker is working carefully, a woman in blue is reading a letter, a couple is drinking a good wine, a girl is watching in a mirror the effects of a pearls necklace on her face, a milkmaid is dropping milk in a vase, a geographer is studying a globe or some maps, an artist is painting the portrait of a girl, some girls are playing a guitar, a keyboard, a flute, a soldier meets a smiling girl, another young girl seems happy or in trouble (we cannot understand) with her blue and white turban and her pearl earring.

In one of that room there is a man with a strange hat. In another one a plat in foreground seems to be a precious Chinese Ming porcelain with blue and white ornaments. The strange hat of that man in fact is coming from Canada (according to Timothy Brooks' book of 2008, 'Vermeer's Hat') and in that painting there is also the map of those water views, useful maybe to arrive in China for Netherlands ships.

But in the end, the new commercial path proved just as difficult to navigate. Thus, it was the inhabitants of Delft who took the initiative to produce their own precious porcelain with white and blue figures, imitating the Ming tradition, with deep roots in ancient Persia. For these porcelains, known as Delft porcelain, the small town of Vermeer is nowadays famous all over the world.

We will never know if the plat in foreground of the painting entitled 'Girl reading a letter in front of a window' has been made in Delft or in Jingdezhen (or in Nanjing itself), but the story is linking the two cultures in name of global trading, aesthetical taste and overall daily life objects.

4.

The use of Western perspective in a theatral image is evident in a picture of a very famous Chinese album (ink and color on silk) by Qing Kuan (Zhao) and other court painters, portraying 'The Grand Imperial Wedding of the Guangxu Emperor and Empress Longyu' (happened on February 26th 1889, in the last years of Qing Dinasty). The picture shows the opulence of the wedding ceremonies and the nuptials held in the outer court are shown with brilliant colors and with vivid detail. According to the tradition, a lot of persons, member of the imperial court, are keeping a specific position, becoming part of the space and of the architecture (as they were the columns of San Peter rather than not the persons in the Roman square).

The wedding ceremonies between the Emperor and Jinfeng was an extremely extravagant and spectacular occasion in a year maybe fundamental for the history of Modern China (in 1898 the same Guangxu undertook 'The Hundred Days' Reform or Wuxu Reform') but also still deeply placed in the sense of tradition of late Qing.

The picture in perspective is showing the 'Hall of the Supreme Harmony' and its court, seen from a high point on the 'Gate of the Supreme Harmony', where (according to imperial traditions) the route of the Emperor's wedding procession had to pass. But on January 16th 1889, the Forbidden City had caught fire and the Gate of the Supreme Harmony burnt down. There was no time to rebuild it and so the Empress Dowager Cixi ordered the construction of a tent resembling the gate. Built in paper and wood, it had exactly the same height and width as the original gate, with the same decoration. So, it was an illusion, useful to represent a drama, like into a theatre.

5.

A very original part of the Yuanming Yuan Garden in Beijing was designed for the Emperor Qianlong by the Italian Jesuit Lay Brother Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining, 1688–1766) in the same years in which Canaletto was painting his Venetian 'Capriccio'. It was the Western mansions (Xiyang Lou) section of 18th century European-style palaces, fountains and formal gardens.

The Italian Jesuit and also great artist (able to keep together Western and Chinese fine arts) designed a 'Capriccio' and 'Pastiche' at the same time. The admiration of the Emperor for the European decorations, ornaments, plans, façades and gardens and his desire to re-create a Western side of the Imperial gardens pushed Castiglione in making a real 'collage', combining mazes, pavilions, arches and columns.

Surely, in the context of the Imperial gardens, Xiyang Lou (the hill, the triumphal arch, the palaces, the fountain) was a clear heterotopy, a space that has nothing to do with the surroundings. It will be destroyed in 1890 by that British Lord Elgin, whose father had partially destroyed the Parthenon in Athens. It will also be rebuilt (as a 'Capriccio' in a new theme park) in 1997, in Zhuhai, Guandong, 2300 km far from Beijing. Tourists love any 'Capriccio' a lot.

6.

The Paris that Monet and the other Impressionist painters portray is the new European city, now dominated by the idea of progress (railway stations), by technology (light everywhere, first gas and then electric), by innovative means of transport (trams and subway lines, but especially cars). It is a 'City of Flows' which the technical urban planning manuals begin to represent in section: height of buildings and trees, width of the road, the role played by the subsoil, where all kinds of systems are located.

If in the contemporary late Qing Dynasty era, China, for cultural and historical reasons, seems far from this process, the development of Shanghai starting from the 1920s as a modern and innovative city that looks to the West ('the eastern Paris'), allows to rediscover the attitude of the Impressionist painters even among some Chinese artists who are gradually rediscovered nowadays and who all have a close relationship with Shanghai (and sometimes even with Paris). Pan Yuliang (woman artist from Yangzhou, 1895–1977) was educated in Shanghai, destined to have great success in Paris from the end of the 1930s, extraordinary in working on a Chinese version of the Parisian experience of Auguste Renoir (one of the most famous impressionists).

Guan Zilan (also a female artist 1903–1986), who introduced *Fauvism* in China as one of the artistic outcomes of Impressionism, was born in Shanghai and there remained all her life after a period of training in Japan. In Shanghai Ren Weiyin (1918–1994) studied and there opened his studio after 1937, as a painter with an existence that is intertwined with the political history of modern China. His painting 'Nanjing Road in Shanghai' seems to repeat very closely the lesson of Claude Monet: 'Boulevard des Capucines' seems to be here, close to the Huangpu River.

The 'Bund' and Nanjing Road in Shanghai become the places chosen to tell the story of the new Chinese city. Some largely spread pictures, between 1920s and 1940s, describe exactly that urban landscape. Some of those pictures are still showing on the foreground the World War Memorial (later destroyed by the Japanese Army). Shanghai in 1930s is a city that can be described in section just as Paris: it is another 'City of Flows' as Paris was half a century before.

7.

The factory as an urban building is the great protagonist not only of the architecture of the modern movement (as a completely new typological theme in the Tenties), but also of the radical change of the city. Chinese figurative art, like the art of Europe, also celebrates the entrance of the factory (and of the periphery) into the urban landscape, but it does so a little later, in the years preceding the 'Great Leap Forward' (1958). First of all, the propaganda posters, often anonymous, are by now very important in helping realizing the imagery and cultural climate of an era of Chinese history (so much that they are multiplying museums, such as the PPAC in Shanghai, and private collections, such as the Hafna Foundation, which exhibit them as pieces of art). The new urban themes are the same as those of Sironi: railway stations, trams, trucks, factories, workers' houses and chimneys.

A whole series of artists are also involved in that new urban landscape, deriving from the teaching of Feng Zikai (1898–1975): their drawings, between the comic and the satirical, play with tradition and give a vivid portrait of the new industrial China of the 1950s.

Among all the images, Wu Kuiqiang's table 'Socialism is Great'(1953) is taken from a comic in the 'Shenyang Daily', the newspaper of one of the first large industrial centers in modern China. Between locomotives, chimneys, factories and workers, the cartoon returns the same world of propaganda posters, but with a type of representation not so far from the painted scroll 'Along the River During the Qingming Festival' (12th century). Tradition seems to be always alive in the folded side of Modernity.

8.

LIFE magazine was also deeply interested in China, sharply in the Doisenau years, in one of the maybe most complicated historical moments for the Country. The pictures printed on the pages of the American magazine remains nowadays as quite interesting witnesses of urban spaces and the daily life in them.

The young American photographer Jack Birns (1919–2008) was sent to Shanghai in 1946 and there he described (beyond the open support for Nationalist Party) life and spaces of a city already international and cosmopolitan and yet full of contradictions, between elegant foreign diplomats and businessmen and poor and neglected local people.

Just two years later, again for the same magazine LIFE, one of the most famous photographers of the twentieth century, Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908–2004), will take the photo of the market crash during 'The Last Days of the Kuomintang'. He will later move on to Beijing, where in 1950 (just the year of the Doisenau kiss in Paris) he will describe the theater of the new China, in an also romantic *dilemma* between tradition and innovation, cultural description and political celebration. Some of his photographs would go down in history.

Wilson Hicks, picture editor of LIFE magazine from 1937 to 1950, once said: 'the photographic journalist of tomorrow should be a bachelor of arts, a master of photography, a doctor of journalism. Then, in tomorrow's World of the Image, he could become an editor someday, whereas today he is prepared only to be a photographer' (Words and Pictures: An Introduction to Photojournalism, Harper, New York 1952). Effectively, reporting the urban space of a city nowadays is a precis job, that requests sharp skills.

Often photography fixed forever some urban scenario and the kiss by Doisneau is now on puzzles, T-shirts, mugs. But, at the same time, everyone could portrait the urban space he/she loves with his/her 'smartphone camera', making new interpretations of it and multiplying its images.

9.

Cinematograph became, above all in the last 30 years of 20th century, an extraordinary instrument to tell and document urban space and natural/cultural landscapes, always showing facts at the present (even past facts) in the meanwhile it is there, in front of spectators. What frescoes, paintings, engraves, drawings and even photographs had just suggested (it's possible diving into reality while watching a picture), thanks to cinema is immediate and clearly evident.

It may be possible that Wim Wenders is the real hero of this idea of cinema and of the interplay between spaces and persons: from 'Alice in the Cities' (1974) to 'Paris, Texas' (1984), from 'Faraway, So Close!' (1993) to 'Lisbon Story' (1994), from 'Buena Vista Social Club' (1999) to the 'Salt of the Earth' (2014), his long carrier demonstrates the possibility offered by movies to introduce spectators to urban (and natural) space through an intense and poetic storytelling.

Obviously Fenyang in Northern Shanxi Province is not like Berlin in Germany, a county level city in China is not like a capital city of Europe, but Jia Zhangke (born 1970 and generally regarded as a leading figure of the 'Sixth Generation' movement of Chinese cinema) is maybe the Chinese movie director more similar to Wim Wenders in describing together the places and the lives of people in it. In fact, he is also strongly interested in using space to describe society, specifically the Chinese society of nowadays, and European public of cinema fans love him a lot. Even if he is much younger than Wenders, it is possible to consider him as 'the Chinese Wenders'.

'Mountains May Depart' (山河故人, 2015) is maybe his masterpiece. In three temporary acts (1999, 2014, 2025), it tells the story of a woman in Fenyang (played by Zhao Tao, wife of Jia Zhangke, actress in many of his movies).

When she is 25 year-old, the lady must decide between two suitors: a gas station owner (whom she has little connection with but could drastically improve her material living conditions) and a poor laborer in a local coal mine and finally decides to marry the first one in the hope of leaving Fenyang. In 2014, she is now divorced from the husband and still lives in Fenyang, known as a prominent and generous woman in the city. The husband, remarried and got richer, lives in Shanghai with their 7 years-old son, Daole (English 'Dollar'), who very seldom goes to visit her. In 2025, the son is attending college in Australia in a globalized world, constantly fighting with his father, loving his Chinese language teacher (an older woman). After talking with her, he decides to go back home to see his mother again.

The dramatic plot has been represented in three different film frame formats (one for each historical period of the story), as a tribute to the art of storytelling through cinema. The urban spaces of the movie are first of all the ones of Fenyang, where the events of 1999 are located: a county-level city, with a traditional part, site for Spring Festival celebrations, some small shops and above all the coal mine and some institutional buildings. Shanghai, where the 2014 facts are located, is the international face of China nowadays, represented overall as an expected goal into the hall of a railway station. Melbourne in Australia, as the globalized horizon/social dream of contemporary Chinese middle class, is a smart city of the next future, full of skyscrapers and speed highway, seen from a plane or a helicopter.

Like Wim Wenders, also Jia Zhangke creates specific spaces rather than stages. It can be observed in relation to the protagonist of his movies: especially the theme park in 'The World' [世界] (2004), the flooded town Fengjie at the Three Gorges Dam in 'Still Life' [三峡好人] (2006), the industrial plant in the short movie 'Black Breakfast' (2008), the Shanghai Bund in the documentary 'I Wish I Knew' [海上传奇] (2010), the constantly changing Chengdu settlement of 24 City [二十四城记] (2010), even in the short movie shot on iPhone XS 'The Bucket' [一个桶] (2019).

10.

In fact, the case of 'The Black Incal' is the same that happens with many of other visionary architectures of the 20th century authors (from Le Corbusier to Hilbersheimer, from Wright to Arata Isozaki, from Yona Friedman to Archigram): at the beginning those are just visionary *manifestos* and then, gradually, they became reality, transforming themselves into the precise mirror of the great contemporary metropolis, in Asia, in the United States and in Europe. Rem Koolhaas, in 1978, perfectly described this paradigm with his unforgettable book 'Delirious New York'.

Even China does not shun this phenomenon: many authors of contemporary comics (漫画), who often collaborate with Western authors, have described the spaces of the city: from the Nanjing in 1937 described by Zhou Zongkai (2014), to the Shanghai of Golo Zhao (2012), from the solitary Beijing illustrated by the young 'blogger' Yao Ren (2017) to the Spring hutong's landscape of a water-colored Beijing by Jun Nie, from the Kunming crowded villages described by Li Kunwu (2014) until the impressive and vivid Hong Kong urban spaces in the drawing by Stella So Man-Yee (2018).

However, one of the most interesting episodes of the use of the visionary paradigm for urban spaces in recent years' China is the science fiction novel 'Folding Beijing'(北京折叠) by the young Tsinghua PhD Candidate Hao Jingfang. In her vision, Beijing[3] (within the 6th Ring) is divided by three classes physically, sharing the same earth surface in each 48 hour cycle: the first class with 5 million population occupy the space for 24 hours from 6 am to 6 am, after which the earth's surface turns upside-down; the second class (25 million middle-class people) enjoy 16 hours from 6 am to 10 pm until the buildings fold and retract; the third class (50 million lower level people) can be awake for 8 hours till 6 am, to treat rubbish of the other two cities in another unfolded and high rise buildings city.

When each class is turned down or folded, the residents there are put into sleep: travelling between classes is tightly controlled and violators go into jail. The moment of change from one city to another city, from one Beijing to another Beijing, is called 'the transition'.

Conclusions

This paper has been written to confirm the methodological value of comparative studies. Admitedly, the 10 Chinese images cannot sharply correspond to the 10 Western images. However, that is not a real weak point. In deeply reading differences and similarities, we could better understand not only the discontinuity of Chinese urban culture (and perhaps Chinese urban morphologies) in comparison with European urban culture (and perhaps European urban morphologies) but above all, the intimate features of European urban forms in themselves. In the present condition of urban studies between China and Europe, only a comparative attitude seems to be able to show intriguing results to be reached. It is an attitude that deserves to be cultivated and used (and the Sino-Italian team 'Transitional Morphologies' is engaged nowadays exactly with that challenge).

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