

SINOPOLIS:  
**"Chineseness" and the Modern Chinese City**

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Since the mid-nineteenth-century Opium Wars, a question common to “emergent “, modern "nation-states" has been posed in China: how to regain/establish national sovereignty and autonomy, without losing "essence." In China, while intellectuals wished to combat colonialism in China, it was China’s own past that was considered the cause of China’s problems.

Radical dissatisfaction with the classical tradition had its beginnings in the recognition that China was powerless to repel foreign colonialist aggression, in particular British imperialist ambitions. This was manifested by China's defeats in the nineteenth-century Opium Wars, but dissatisfaction and heightened calls for a total social, political and intellectual break with the past, reached their crescendo only after the apparent failure of the 1911 Chinese Revolution to effect real change, and most

forcefully after the deplorable treatment under the terms of the 1919 Versailles Peace treaty. The post-war Paris conference, was supposed to realize President Wilson's new world order of self-determined nations-states, but rather than reverse the imperialist powers' hundred or so years of colonialist territorial and economic encroachment as radical Chinese had hoped, the Versailles peace process entrenched and advanced it. It did so by transferring to Japan, ally of Britain and the US in the Great War, Germany's forfeited colonies and economic rights in the Shandong Peninsular, thus providing Japan with its first major territorial foothold on the Chinese mainland. Japan had been on the side of the victors, but so had China. Thousands of Chinese coolies, enrolled in the Chinese Labour Corps, had contributed to the war effort by digging trenches and providing other support on the battlefields of Europe. That the Peace Treaty and the principle of self-determination were not meant to impinge on imperialist power and ambitions in Asia and Africa is clear, for Japan was not alone in profiting from Germany's defeat. While Japan was conceded German possessions in China, France, and Britain took over Germany's colonies in Africa, No victorious power conceded any overseas territory. Wilson's and the US government's double standards were also evident in the United States' own status as colonizing power, which we tend to forget, since the United States has forgotten that the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constituted a moment of American

territorial imperial expansion.

Even so, the linking of self-determination to the the adoption of the Western nation-state model was reaffirmed by the Versailles treaty, and Chinese intellectuals were once more convinced that modern ideological nation-building was the way out. AS Frank Furedi has put it, "On the basis of the European and American experience the association of nationalism with modernity was deeply embedded in Western thought....the national revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had marked the West's entry into the modern capitalist age. On the basis of this experience, nationalism could not be rejected by Western thinkers, since it was identified as the most significant manifestation of modernity....Imperialism could not, without renouncing its own culture of modernity, mount an attack against the claims of nationalism."<sup>1</sup> Thus, while the hypocrisy of the Versailles peace settlement had made clear to China's intellectuals the intention of foreign powers to tighten their colonialist grip on China, the nationalist road model of modernization was reaffirmed. After Versailles, the cultural and intellectual revolution that had been gaining momentum since the turn of the century, assumed an even greater importance as it came to be seen by many intellectuals as the only means by which to enlighten China's populace, to enable it to engage in resistance, and to relaunch the Chinese revolution Thus from its earliest days modernizing

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Furedi, *The New Ideology of Imperialism: Renewing The Moral Imperative*, London and Boulder, CO: Pluto Press, 1994, p. 5.

culture in China was of seminal importance to the dominant nationalist, patriotic, discourse to which most intellectuals whether Communist, non-Communist or anti-Communist subscribed. As with other dominated societies in the capitalist period, this need to assert national subjecthood was "not due to internal necessity but to external pressure -- it is a requirement for...participation in the global economy."<sup>2</sup> Versailles, while denying China national integrity and autonomy, had nevertheless reaffirmed this very principle and thus as elsewhere, in China "the nation as a frame of reference" has been "a constant presence in cultural production."<sup>3</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century China had no modern national language, and thus no modern national literature and no modern culture. Forty years later it had. But the process was painful and controversial. Writers and intellectuals rejected thousands of years of literature and learning. The language and the texts were criticised for lacking Chineseness, and indeed intertextually owed much to foreign examples. In the first half of the twentieth century in Chinese one spoke not of modernization but Westernization. But at least the new Chinese language looked like Chinese. With visual culture the contrast and the extent of experimentation was stark. In painting style, aesthetics and the tools and material of the practice of Chinese painting differed dramatically and attempts at

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<sup>2</sup> Madhava Prasad, "A Theory of Third World Literature," *Social Text* 31/32 (1992), p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> Prasad p. 78.

synchronizing elite traditional painting with Western techniques and aesthetic ideology were unhappy. In architecture and construction, modernity was exclusively Western, with almost all design and planning being imposed by Western powers and the Japanese.

In literature and art, arguments raged over the elite nature of cultural production. It was not enough, argued Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白, to simply modernize language and literature for an elite, new national popular forms were needed. But China had no national popular culture. China had only a state-wide elite culture that had held together the diverse parts of the state for two millennia. While mandarins and merchants could communicate in the lingua franca, Mandarin, and could read and write classical Chinese without regard for dialectal differences, the peasants, the people practised altogether different oral, vernacular, local cultures. This was so of their literature (local tales and folk songs) but also of their habitat.

Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century both right and left had determined to recuperate local popular culture and transform it into a standard national culture. This the Communist Party eventually succeeding in doing. There was thus always a tension between those who wished to impose this nationalized popular culture and those who had developed a modern Western-style literary culture. Moreover, even in the elite cultural sphere, there was the total disorientation of the artificiality that came with the

introduction of Western epistemological categories. Knowledge categories that had existed for millennia were swept away in favour of scientific categories and genres that frequently had no equivalences in the Chinese cultural landscape. The novel as such did not exist, literature as discrete category did not exist, as indeed it had not existed in Europe two centuries earlier. Philosophy was another problematic category which has left us with misunderstanding and controversy to this day. Most of these epistemological categories had been imported wholesale from Japan where the Japanese had already mastered their negotiation, but in China the shock was brutal. There was then for many decades a generalized conviction in the necessity to Westernize, and to reject the local.

It was not until the victory of the Communist Party in 1949 that the question of how to literally build New China was really posed. Of course, in order to invest the old space of the state with a new communist-national sense there were obvious measures. The capital was moved back from Nanking (Nanjing 南京) to Peking (Beijing 北京), the Forbidden City was thrown open to visitors in part, and in part reserved for the central authorities's government administrative and living quarters. The space in front of Tiananmen was razed. The city walls were demolished. All of this was highly symbolic and even logical, if aesthetically regrettable.

The question of architectural style hardly arose for the Party given their close alliance with Moscow which represented all that was modern and progressive. Soviet architecture imposed itself.

And yet there had been debate. Liang Sicheng 梁思成 (1901-1972), son of the intellectual reformer Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873 – 1929), like his father was interested in returning his country to an imagined glory even if it meant modernizing. But like his father he also believed in a Chinese essence that could be preserved or rekindled. Trained in the United States, Liang is the author of China's first history on Chinese architecture and founder of the Architecture Department of Qinghua University 清华大学.

Liang had a monumentalist vision of China's architecture. In 1934, he conducted an expedition to Shansi province to find and study old buildings indicated in Tang and Song Dynasty records.<sup>4</sup> Liang's national essence was located in a monasterial and imperial architectural past that was never national but simply belonged to an elite imperial order. He failed to persuade the new Communist rulers not to destroy many of Beijing's monuments. He was criticised in the 1950s and persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. His critique of the authorities practices were no restrained to their policies of demolition, but also the new constructions that tried to reinvent a Chineseness. For all his conviction that a national form should be reinvented, he denounced the

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<sup>4</sup> See Wilma Fairbank, *Liang and Lin: Partners in Exploring China's Architectural Past*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994.

efforts of his colleagues as “Western suits with Chinese skullcaps”.

The controversy over “big roofs” is interesting. The condemnation of this limited “return” to Chineseness is cast as an economic one, the avoidance of waste. This emphasis on eliminating waste, on the scarcity of material resources, has been pointed to as a more generalized problematic by Lu Duanfang in his recent book on the history of modern Chinese urban form.<sup>5</sup> For Lu what is missing from Homi Bhabha’s discussion of the postcolonial dilemma is precisely the notion of “scarcity”. In post 1949 China, “the failure of desire is externalized by considering that the failure is due to scarcity”. For Lu, the historicised and exteriorised condition of this failure leaves open the possibility of a reversal, whereas for Bhabha there is no way out. As Lu himself lets us understand, when talking of Mao’s dictum on the people as a blank page on which can be written the most beautiful poem, Mao turned scarcity into a favoured condition. Yet, this Third World Maoist voluntarism in which Lu seems to see the possibility of an exit from the postcolonial bind is less than convincing. Given the massive destruction of pre-modern buildings, any synthetic neo-Chinese architectural innovation could only now take place in recuperating an idealized imagined past Chineseness that will not be called upon to cohabit urban space with local, vernacular pre-modern, pre-national

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<sup>5</sup>Lu Duanfang. *Remaking Chinese Urban Form: Modernity, Scarcity and Space, 1949-2005*. London: Routledge, 2005, *passim*.



Chinese architecture. Lu's approach, ultimately is a nationalistic one, which in no way hinders the state apparatus's desire to erase the physical traces of a historical memory which lie beyond the control of official history-telling and thus pose a threat to the party-state's monolithic narrative which makes of the past a non-history.

Nevertheless, Lu's proposed explanation, an ethos of scarcity both in material terms but also in regard to an aesthetic imaginary, would account for the dreary and sterile constructions of the 1960s and 1970s. But once China had moved into the so-called reform era of capitalist economics and relative prosperity why the continued paucity in the imagining of local (in the larger sense) design and architectural practice. With a few exceptions, there has been little attempt to imagine what a modern Chinese building would resemble, and in terms of urban space little thought given to the integration of Western architecture into a pre-modern cityscape.

It seems that the only strategy for dealing with the incongruities between the Western and the local is demolition of the old. Indeed the schizophrenic dichotomy, modern=Western versus old=Chinese, with which China has battled for over a century and a half still dominates.

This fear of engaging the past, this anxiety over hybridity, the reluctance to experiment, is connected to two problems – the problem of national identity, what IS Chinese/Chineseness? And the problem of history – the

reluctance to think and write that history as anything other than a narrative facilitating the maintenance in power of the Communist party.

The paradoxes: the Chinese Communist Party, the last major communist party on the planet managing not only one of the biggest capitalist economies, but also the longest continuous cultural history – a history it was determined to deconstruct. But now against a void in historical writing – history is still the reserve of the CP apparatus – history as in the revolutionary period remains a tool of government with which historical consciousness can be manipulated so as to maintain power. Marxist-Leninist history at least unmasked Chinese myths – in the last 15 years, we have seen the reinscribing of such myths in Chinese school history textbooks. Now the Chinese Communist Party is not simply the founder of New China, but the “legitimate” and only defender, of China understood as an ancient “nation” – not just state.

So how is the past dealt with apart from demolishing its physical traces? Well there are the processes of museumization, the construction of simulacra, marginalized substitute “ancient” places and buildings, the marginalization of the difficult-to-deal with, the de-historicization of material culture.

As with China's intellectual history, China's material history has been re-invented and re-formatted to serve a nationalist ideology, an ideology that has already been translated into a

popular national collective imaginary. Revolutionary China is almost no more. Its traces are few and far between. China's artisans are so good at their job, that “timeless”, and history-less, pre-modern simulacra buildings belonging to not time in particular are easily replicated.

In modern cities such as Tianjin , over the past twenty years we have seen the construction of so-called “culture streets”, China’s own quaint Chinatowns, in the middle of Westernized modernity.

While Tianjin has always been a Western city, Beijing was not. Nevertheless in Beijing the same process of displacement of old-style has taken place. The Northern vernacular architecture is symbolized in the four-sided courtyard, but in Beijing and other cities these have almost all disappeared from the urban landscape together with the *hutong* 胡同 – or alleyways – that weaved them together. In China’s postmodern landscape these pre-modern compounds are reproduced in museum displays or mimicked in simulacra. In the new age of Chinese capitalism *siheyuan* 四合院 look-alikes, but with “mod cons”, are naturally available for purchase in the new middle-class suburbs.

While on Wangfujing 王府井, the heart of the old capital the courtyards have been demolished. The modern buildings of the 1930s to 1960s have also been razed. A few monuments remain. And the backstreet Culture Street 文化

街 – a shopping street for Chinese trinkets was squeezed in behind the modern façades a decade ago.

This is China's main shopping street, China's Oxford Street, but the even spread of the practices of consumer culture is now as essential to China's national cohesion as the waving of the little red book once was. Where there was Mao, now there is McDonald.

That homogenization and reinforcement of national practices are behind the state's encouragement of global consumer practices – supermarket shopping – fast-food consumption – is no conspiratorial fantasy, but proven.. Where Communist national economic policy had failed to incorporate the masses throughout China into common patterns of consumption, economic reform consumerism's policies are succeeding.

For every supermarket opened in a major city Carrefour must open one in a smaller city.

As the National (American) became the Global, the Global will be the national. Ultimately a process of glocalization will take place, national brands but global practices – Bruce Lee fast food joints.

Before long – indeed just after the Olympics ("ONE WORLD ONE DREAM") – we shall see patriotic campaigns to eat and buy Chinese. But this “Chinese” will not be the richness of a massive and diverse cultural history,

it will be a national “Chinese” – the China of Chinese chain stores supermarkets.<sup>6</sup>

As with the expansion of consumer culture throughout urban and less urban China - the practices of supermarket and chain store shopping – the expansion of “homogenizing” architecture not only integrates Chinese space into a globalized habitat, but within China's national borders nationalizes building practices. In the 1980s every major Chinese city wanted a hotel with a revolving restaurant on the top. The landscape is easier to change than other human habitats – the languages we inhabit and that inhabit communities. Of course, national languages can be imposed – Europe and especially France is a good example of centralized language imposition accompanied by local language eradication, but languages can also survive. In China Cantonese and Shanghaiese, Fukienese, largely due to the economic power of their cities, survive and indeed have become markers of belonging to successful, local, middle-class communities.

Beijing is losing its speakers of the old Beijing dialect who can afford to live there – and then many have seen their neighbourhoods demolished. In the race to re-nationalize, the capital –Stalinist architecture and big-roof hybrid buildings- had already attempted this in the 1950s - what connects Beijing to its past – a northern, Manchu-Han

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<sup>6</sup> In April 2008, ten months after this paper was first presented, and thus even before the Olympics took place, the Carrefour supermarkets were boycotted, angry crowds demonstrated against France's treatment of its representatives who had accompanied the flame to Paris.

hybrid culture – is disappearing.<sup>7</sup> Already in the 1950s – with the immigration of Communist Party cadres by then tens of thousands, Beijing had been nationalized once – now its globalized façades, re-invented “Chinatown” spaces – have finished the process of de-localizing Beijing and leaving it a globalized yet also, nationalized city.

So in fact what is at stake is not a loss of national identity – a project which has robbed humanity – and continues to do so – of diversity and synthetic creative possibilities. It is not the Chineseness of China’s cities that has been lost but the local-ness – the local-ness of the city and its hinterland, has been sacrificed to the new local-ness of the nation in the context of a globalized planet. *Local place has given way to national homogenized space.*

Mao’s statues have disappeared from many prominent places – how long, now that the Soviet-trained engineer-administrators are fading into oblivion, before the capital’s Stalinist buildings, follow the fate of old Chinese theatres that perform no ideological nor commercial role?

Neo-Confucianism and the debate over National Form, a debate that has come and gone for over a century is currently raging again. What might be the impact on China’s cityscapes? What will the political will to rectify a national essence produce in terms of urban landscapes and human alienation?

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<sup>7</sup> Han 汉/漢 representing the supposedly homogeneous, but in fact disparate, Chinese majority "race" or "ethnicity".

But whatever was Chinese style? If we address the question of local domestic architectural style, and these are already totalizing categories that take little account of local variations and the historicity of the styles in question, we could isolate the compound with courtyard (*siheyuan*) in Northern China. The peasant caves or *yaodong* 窑洞 in Shaanxi Province made famous and celebrated by the much publicised spectacle of the Communist headquarters at Yan'an in the 1930s and 1940s – and reinvested with meaning by the cinematographer Chen Kaige 陈凯歌 in his 1984 *Yellow Earth* 黄土地.

Earthen buildings, *tulou* 土楼, in South-East China's Fujian Province stilt houses that may stand over water, or *diaolou* 吊楼 in southern China.

Here once again, as in linguistic classifications we have major categories which differ from one another but which also hide the specificities of local house-building practices as for instance those used by many of the 50 or so minorities in China.

China faces the same problems as other modernizing states, environmental pollution, global warming, man-induced sandstorms and other climatic problems, the economic and ideological processes that have seen millions pushed out or priced out of their homes that has exacerbated the habitual alienation of modern city life. There will be no undoing, no de-reification of this process of Westernization.

Will modernization remain for China a successive questioning of the impossibility of synthesis in the face of a jumble of new national, old local, and Western intellectual and material culture, a confused and aimless consumer society?

Or could be a more imaginative future than homogenisation ("one world") and the empty satisfaction of having integrated the global economy.