

UNDERSTANDING THE CHINESE CITY, by Li Shiqiao. London: Sage, 2014.

For more than 100 years since the end of imperial reign and the economic reform in 1978 in China, the Chinese city has been tremendously reshaped to accommodate many features of the Western city through a modernization process and neoliberal urbanism (He and Wu, 2009). However, due to traditional Chinese cultural context including Confucianism and the Chinese writing system, the contemporary city in China still maintains its own features and appears differently in many aspects with those in the Western city. By deeply excavating these Chinese traditions of ideas, knowledge and philosophy, this book introduces three imperatives, abundance, prudence and figuration respectively, in the formation of Chinese city in its nine chapters.

The first imperative, abundance, includes three chapters concerning the quantities of things and people in the Chinese city. The first chapter discusses quantity regulation regarding formation of both Western and Chinese cities. Fundamentally different from Western city, the character of Chinese city such as shape of architecture is heavily influenced by philosophical concepts, the Chinese numerical scheme thinking, for instance the productive binary, the yin and the yang, five elements, twelve temporal markers and sixty-four hexagrams. By reviewing Hong Kong's history and its capital-oriented urban development, chapter 2 compares differences between Hong Kong and Venice/New York, in which New York, with similar features of dense skyscrapers like Hong Kong, is influenced by intentional and rule-based quantity management rather than functional quantities and saturated at human scale in Hong Kong. The author concludes that mainland China's urbanization follows the way carried out in Hong Kong, and three types of urban development are discussed. In chapter 3, the author states that lack of distinction between subsistence labour and meaningful work is due to specific Chinese social manner, in which 'connections' (*guanxi*) is necessary in building and maintaining relationships. Two influential dependencies of labour that impacts on Chinese cities are introduced, and uniformity that gives rise of similar standards of architecture has emerged in urban design through for example 'group design creativity', which promotes rapid development on one hand, and threatens 'environmental and design heritage' on the other hand.

In the second imperative of prudence consisting of three chapters, the author firstly reviews two different conceptions of danger, in which in Western cultural context, 'prudence is something to be overcome' and combatant body is encouraged according to ancient Greeks as well as Renaissance; whereas in Chinese cultural context, danger should be avoided completely according to the conception of body in safety. Several Chinese characteristics of degrees of care and the forms in which care is provided are introduced, for example, the 'care of stranger', preservation regimens, familial bonds, intensive care of the protected home, regular care of work unit, and *jianghu*. Hong Kong is taken as an example of Chinese traditional strategies of health

and hygiene combining with its colonial history, and two prominent urban features of architecture are given as the consequences of urban hygiene development.

Figuration, which is the Chinese Writing System in Chinese cultural context, also plays an important role in determining characters of Chinese cities in addition to abundance and prudence, by transforming accumulated quantities to philosophical, meaningful and aesthetical forms and things. The author explains the deficiency of heritage conservation in Chinese cities according to 'cultural tradition in the memory strategy of spatial and temporal relocation' by giving two examples, reconstruction of Yellow Crane Tower in Wuhan and Central Pier in Hong Kong. The author explains that this pervasive phenomenon of replacement of old buildings with 'new, similar-looking and different located building' is deeply rooted in Chinese tradition of memory without location and cities are often conceived as text in China, which can be replaced by new editions. However, over the past thirty years, these Chinese philosophies of managing city have led a rapid urban development, for example the development of the city of Shenzhen, which accompanies with new culture of memory with mobility. Also in this section, the author discusses objects of value, preferred nature, semantic distribution, and state function and bureaucratic structure of architecture in the Chinese cities.

*Understanding the Chinese City* presents an exceptional perspective, deeply rooted in historical and cultural context, in understanding the formation, quantities and forms of current Chinese urban organizations. Several interesting ideas in the book that worth mentioning include a number of Chinese cultural consequences resulting from Chinese philosophy of avoidance and removal of danger, such as no battle scene and description of death in traditional Chinese art, the Chinese way of preservation of the body, artificial constructs of Chinese garden and perpetual stability in political conception, all have influenced social formation and design and construction of Chinese cities; relational conduct, corresponding to Chinese sense of hierarchy, is increasingly accompanied with rapid wealth accumulation, while no relationships of people are established among strangers as hierarchy is invisible, which in turn leads to ubiquitous spitting and honking away pedestrians in urban China; the analysis of the common phenomenon of demolishing old buildings and constructing new buildings that have similar-looking but locate differently as the old one, and as a metaphor. Such substantial urban renewal and reconstruction can be seen as these old buildings are unsafe and unhygienic, and demolishing them is like 'discarding possibly infected items' to avoid danger. This so-called 'disposable urban strategy' in conjunction with Chinese tradition of memory without location leads relatively short life of Chinese architecture. Furthermore, a great illustration is made as the spatial and temporal relocation is linked to 'practice of setting the year to zero at the start of each imperial reign' rather than inheriting the previous reign. I expect to hear more about how it correlated with urban development.

Overall, with its vast and extraordinary illustrations of Chinese philosophical traditions as well as Western thinking and ideas, the book deserves reading. Its efforts

and contributions contrive to better understanding the pervasive phenomenon existing in Chinese cities, for example substantial urban demolition, financial product of architecture, presence of walls, spatial inside and outside of the cities and other developmental modes in the cities in China. The reader group will also include those people who are very keen to know why there are huge differences between China and the West in relation to urban formations and organizations.

#### REFERENCES

He, S. & Wu, F. (2009) China's emerging neoliberal urbanism: Perspectives from urban redevelopment. *Antipode*, 41, 282-304.

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