

# Reflections on Place and Place-making in the Cities of China

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## Abstract

*This article is about the small spaces of the city we call 'places'. Places are shaped by being lived in; they are spaces of encounter where the little histories of the city are played out. They are, of course, also shaped by the state through planning, supervision, ordinances, and so forth. The patterns and rhythms of life in the small spaces of the city are therefore not simply a straightforward projection of civil life. Places are also sites of resistance, contestation, and actions that are often thought to be illegal by the (local) state. After introducing the concept of place, the remainder of this article is a reflection on places and place-making (but also place-breaking) in urban China. Because the patterns and rhythms of urban life have continuity, however, my approach to their study was historical. The story told here is roughly divided into four major periods: Imperial China, Republican China, the People's Republic under Mao Zedong, and the reform period from about 1980 onward. I then return to the concepts of place and place-making with which I began, summarizing my findings and suggesting some topics for further research.*

For it is still the case that no one lives in the world in general (Clifford Geertz, 1996: 262).

It may make sense under contemporary imbalances of power to let globalization have its spaces, as in Pudong, and the many Pudongs of Global Capital, and rebuild architectures of sociability from locations that have not lost completely memories of the social. Let us not forget that with all the talk about globalization, there are many, many of those places (Arif Dirlik, 2005).

## The meaning of place and why its study is important

Let me begin with a little story from Taiwan, where I spent several months in the spring of 2006.<sup>1</sup>

I would like to thank Laurence Ma, Daniel Abramson, the China Studies Roundtable at UBC, and several anonymous reviewers for their many helpful comments and suggestions. As is generally understood, all errors of fact and interpretation are entirely my own.

1 Taiwan, today the Republic of China, was annexed by China's last dynasty, the Qing, in 1683, when it was placed under the jurisdiction of Fujian Province. Taiwan's *de facto* independent status is highly contested, and official maps of the People's Republic of China show Taiwan as a province. Some authors include both Taiwan and Hong Kong in a concept of 'Greater China'.

This is a story about Shan-Hsia, a country town located in what some would call the peri-urban area of Greater Taipei where city folk meet country folk. Actually, Shan-Hsia is only about 25 km from the center of the capital city. We could also say, of course, that there is no longer any 'peri-urban' in Taiwan, since urban growth sprawls uninterruptedly from north to south along the west coast of this island nation, backed by a chain of mountains some of which rise to over 2000 m.

I visited Shan-Hsia on a Saturday morning. As we approached, we passed a number of massive apartment complexes which anywhere else would have been an architect's nightmare but here were loudly hawked to customers eager to experience what they imagined to be the heaven of modern living.

Arriving, we parked our car, no small feat in itself in a street choked with vehicles and people. Hundreds of motor scooters, like frenzied mosquitoes, darted in and out of the traffic at break-neck speed. You had to be nimble to avoid being knocked over.

It was market day in Shan-Hsia, and as we wended our way to Tsu-Sze Temple, which was our goal, we walked past dozens of market stands crowding the sidewalk, with eager customers jostling each other to buy fresh fish, meats, vegetables and fruits spread out before them in splendid profusion.

Tsu-Sze Temple is famous throughout the region. Originally constructed in 1769, it was destroyed and rebuilt three times. The latest rebuilding started in 1947 and is still incomplete. The temple is dedicated to Chen Tsao-Yin, a native of Henan Province on the mainland who, together with some of his people, had migrated to a place called Chuan Chu in Fujian Province on the coast. His image was enshrined in the temple, and the local folks in Chuan Chu showed respect for his exploits and regarded him as their patron saint. When the original settlers from the district arrived from the mainland in the eighteenth century, they built the temple in memory of their saint.

Today, it is wedged into a small corner of the town, fronting a broad but shallow river. A small, irregularly shaped square containing some shade trees was bustling with people. Children raced each other playing tag, the ubiquitous mosquito scooters had temporarily slowed to participate in the scene, a smell of incense was in the air, and adults in small groups were chatting with each other while a sound truck hovered in a corner of the square, encouraging people to vote for a Mr Wu, the local candidate for the city council. Looking around me, I thought for a moment I was magically transported from twenty-first century Taipei into a scene of the famous scroll painting, 'Spring on the River', depicting a Northern Song Dynasty cityscape alive with people going about their daily affairs. Here life washed in and out of the temple, as worshippers sent their silent prayers to the saints on incense smoke, including a female divinity and her heavenly entourage, pleading for health or money or a husband or a good grade on the next exam, in a fusion of the secular and sacred. People gawked and talked, bowed down and prayed, wandered about (as we did), admiring the intricate, delicate carvings with which every square inch of the temple, including its 122 columns, was adorned.

A pedestrian bridge spanned the river. We ascended by some steps to get a better view. The bridge was lined on both sides with booths, most of which sold some sort of food: freshly fried pancakes prepared under the watchful eyes of waiting customers, a variety of aromatic soups, delicious noodles and dumplings, iced fruit and vegetable juices, and sinful sweets. Nine out of ten stands were cookeries with mostly middle-aged ladies stirring, ladling, cutting, frying, and selling their handiwork for ridiculous prices to hungry customers. On the far end of the bridge, a stage had been set up, and people were beginning to sit down for a show. Meanwhile, a loudspeaker blared what I took to be a Taiwanese version of hard rock. I decided a rural festival was under way, because a long table had been cordoned off on which dozens of competing trays laden with the pride of local farmers, a large but to me unfamiliar root vegetable used in making soup stock, were on display. Presumably, the winning tray would receive a blue ribbon prize.

So why do I tell this story? Because the story of Tsu-Sze Temple is 200 years old! Except for minor technical innovations — plastic dishes, gas stoves, the loudspeakers,

the buzzing mosquitoes, the sound truck — the panorama of which we were a part could have been the townscape of Shan-Hsia two centuries ago. For me, the scene at Tsu-Sze Bridge represents the triumph of irrepressible life over technology. And when I ask myself what the town of Shan-Hsia will be like another half century from now, my answer is: probably pretty much the same as today. In its essentials, nothing significant will have changed. Irrepressible life will continue triumphant.

I take Tsu-Sze Temple and its adjoining precinct to represent a place, and in this article I would like to explore the question of place and place-making, with particular reference to urban China. The literature on this topic is fairly sparse, the principal work being a recent collection by Stephan Feuchtwang (2004). But you might well ask why place-making (and the related question of place-breaking) is important for the urban professions. You might further ask, what precisely we mean by referring to 'place', a slippery word if ever there was one. I will try to answer this question indirectly, with an appeal to everyday experience.<sup>2</sup>

When one of us moves into a new office or newly painted flat we have rented, the first thing we do is to arrange it in ways that will make us feel comfortable and 'at home' in what would otherwise remain what David Harvey calls an absolute material space.<sup>3</sup> We shift the furniture around (or buy new furnishings), perhaps put some pictures on the wall that will make the room more 'homey', throw a rug on the floor, buy some plants to make us feel more cheerful, etc. Clare Cooper Marcus (1995) calls this act of appropriating absolute space, creating a 'mirror of self'.

An analogous thing happens when we move into an established neighborhood. The way of appropriating an already existing 'place' is chiefly through getting to know our neighbors, chatting up the local butcher, learning the names of the streets, and gradually becoming involved with local activities — a fund drive, competitive sports, public celebrations, a visit to the local shrine, and other forms of everyday life. In doing so, we hope to become accepted by what eventually we may refer to as 'our community'. We know that neither home nor neighborhood, at this particular place, will remain ours forever. We change homes; we change communities. But regardless of how many times we assert these claims, both ways of claiming have to do with what I call place-making.

Neighborhoods (sometimes called wards or, as in China, 'streets') are tricky to define. Usually, they have a name. They may be identified by local institutions such as a barbershop, a tea room, a pub, or a temple devoted to a patron saint, all of which are physical places of encounter. They may also be set off from the rest of the townscape by a wall or gate or a sign that says: 'Welcome to Kitsilano'. But to those who inhabit it, a neighborhood will be known and remembered by a particular pattern of social relations and specific, recurrent rituals such as festivals, which bring everyone out into the street in celebration.

Henri Lefebvre (1991) referred to such spaces as '*les espaces vécus*' or 'lived spaces'.<sup>4</sup> The experienced spaces of the city acquire their character as a place by virtue of being lived in. Such places have a different appearance and feeling from deserted or abandoned spaces that have left behind only the empty shell of buildings. They are also different from spaces that have been newly built but are not yet inhabited. In short, by being lived in, urban spaces become *humanized*.

Places are different from landmarks and other buildings that the French anthropologist Marc Augé (1995) has called non-place spaces, such as airports, shopping malls, or hotels. Architects often argue that they can create a 'sense of place' by

2 In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in questions of place, perhaps as a response to the ubiquitous 'space of flows' that in the network society threatens the erasure of places (Castells, 1996). Among the more noteworthy of writings on place, see Tuan (1977), Feld and Basso (1996), David and Wilson (2002), Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003) and Cresswell (2004).

3 Following Harvey (2006: 135).

4 In a footnote of his masterful work, *Thirdspace*, Soja (1996: 40) observes that 'Lefebvre rarely used the concept of "place" in his writings, largely because its richest meaning is effectively captured in his combined use of "everyday life" and "lived space".'

designing a particular building or structure that will stand as a symbol of the city as a whole, for example, the Petrona Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Frank Gehry's Museum in Bilbao, Eero Saarinen's Gateway across the Mississippi River, a giant Ferris wheel in London. Such structures may become landmarks, but they are not places in the sense I am trying to set out here. They are examples of iconic architecture that in today's competitive world are a way of 'branding' cities, just as the classic Coca Cola bottle is universally recognized by its shape as a commodity of a certain kind.

Unlike landmarks, places cannot be designed. Some may become internationally famous, because they are talked and written about, and people come to visit them from afar, expecting to be enchanted. Something of their former aura may still be there, but to detect this requires an imagination that can picture what it was like to live there at that time. Some parts of Paris are like that: the *rive gauche*, Montmartre, places that once had a certain charm or reputation, most of which is gone now, unless the government decides to tart them up, creating a *faux* place for tourists.

Like the people who inhabit them, genuine urban places have a distinctive character, something unique, because — like a house — *they are shaped by being lived in*. But in writing this sentence, I already acknowledge that 'being lived in' also requires a physical form, a spatial context. The form itself needn't be distinctive; in fact, most neighborhoods (to stay with that example) are quite ordinary in appearance. What *is* important is that the form, the built environment, must be inhabited for some considerable period of time until it acquires its own embedded patterns and rhythms of life.<sup>5</sup>

We have come this far in our understanding of the localities we call places. But why bother to study places and how they come into being? I am tempted to argue that it's because they are there, posing a challenge to urbanists. Perhaps more to the point, we study places — their loss and recovery, their character and transformation — because they are the stuff of stories, *part of the little histories of the world*. The study of places is therefore important to us because the stories we tell about them are intrinsically of interest: they give meaning to our life and sometimes they are constitutive of our identity as well.

In today's world of accelerated change, and especially in China, a country dramatically transforming the lives of its 1.3 billion people, hundreds of millions of whom are literally 'on the move', the issue of place-making is particularly urgent. In both city and countryside, the changes engulfing people's lives are epochal in scale and seriously disorienting. Customary patterns and rhythms of life are continually being disrupted, and people are desperate to reorient themselves, cast out into an unfamiliar world. I do not think that we know how to create new urban places, but perhaps by becoming more knowledgeable about place-making (and its opposite, which is the erasure of places) we can avoid or at least help alleviate some of the pain that China's sweeping, hyper-rapid development inflicts upon its people.

I have focused on places as physical spaces that, being lived in, evolve their own patterns and rhythms of life. But in addition, we need to consider the role of the state (both local and central) in the construction and patterning of cities. As a collective actor, the state can initiate or authorize the erasure of an existing place (e.g. a shanty settlement, a neighborhood slated for clearance) and then turn around to build (or help finance) new housing somewhere else, a project which may eventually evolve into a place that is lived in but until then remains an empty shell. And everywhere, seen or unseen, the state's presence is felt as a constraining influence on everyday life. The physical context for the patterns and rhythms of neighborhood life is controlled by the state. Which activities are allowed at certain times of the day or night, who may or may not be seen on the street, what forms of public behavior are permitted and which are not, what kinds of traffic may circulate, what sort of structures may be built and for

5 On the rhythms of everyday life, see Lefebvre (2004).

what purpose, all these are matters decided by the (local) state with or without the input of local citizens. When children march off to school in the morning, it is because the state has made their schooling mandatory. If burning rubbish in the street is forbidden, it is the state that has passed the appropriate regulation. If begging is tolerated on the street, it is because the state has seen fit to allow it. In short, everywhere in the world, the state is empowered, democratically or not, to regulate everyday life in the public spaces of the city.

These actions by the state inevitably lead to resistance, contestations and actions that are often formally illegal. So-called blue laws are ignored. Illegal structures continue to be built. Despite police harassment, panhandling and prostitution flourish. Pubs stay open until after hours. Curfews are broken. But in the end, some accommodations will be made as a place acquires its specific character, shaped not only from within itself but in response to the demands and decisions of the system of governmentality we call the state.

The remainder of this article is devoted to a survey of place-making in urban China. Because I believe that patterns and rhythms of life have continuity, because history allows us to see what is constant and what has changed, my approach will be historical. I have roughly divided my story into four major periods: Imperial China, Republican China, the People's Republic under Mao Zedong, and the reform period from about 1980 onward.<sup>6</sup> In a concluding section, I return to the concepts of place and place-making with which I began, summarizing my findings and suggesting some topics for further research.

## Imperial China

Walls; wards; city god; native place; hungry ghosts; the city of small spaces

Until very recent times, China was a profoundly rural society. When Mao proclaimed the People's Republic on Tiananmen Square, the Gate of Heavenly Peace, on 1 October 1949, China's urban population accounted for probably no more than 10% of the total. Still, throughout the nation's long history, there had been many cities from county seats on up, and most administrative centers were marked by imposing city walls and moats, monumental gates, a drum tower that regulated the rhythms of daily life, and one or more *yamen*, the offices of local authority.

We can get some grasp of what it was like to live in an imperial city by looking at Chang'an, the cosmopolitan imperial capital of the Tang Dynasty between the sixth and tenth century of the common era. If we leave aside its palaces, temples and monasteries, of which there were many, focusing instead on its residential areas which covered seven-eighths of its territory, we see a city of wards that were known as *fang* or *li*. At the height of its splendor, the city was divided into more than 100 of these wards, each of which was surrounded by high walls whose gates, opening to the four cardinal directions, were shut from dusk to dawn as hundreds of drum beats resounded across the roofs of the city.<sup>7</sup> Unlucky residents caught outside their *fang* at these times were arrested and flogged. Within each ward, people might know each other as neighbors,

6 One of my anonymous reviewers urged me to focus on a shorter period instead of attempting a sweeping historical survey. I have resisted this suggestion because, as I have argued elsewhere, the study of urban China needs to be informed by a sense of its own past (Friedmann, 2006). This forced me to become strategically selective in what I would write about.

7 It is not surprising to learn that these rigid rules which confined commoners to their walled neighborhoods were constantly being defied. People would periodically open up 'private' entrances by breaking through the walls. An edict of 767 CE attempted to ban the construction of walls and buildings that intruded into the streets and alleyways of residential wards and markets. Little by little, official edicts lost legitimacy, and the entire residential ward system fell into disrepair. By the Northern Song, wards had become an administrative unit, something altogether different from its Tang predecessor (Xiong, 2000: 215-16).

but for the most part, they must have lived as strangers in this vast metropolis ruled by the emperor himself that was open to them only on the occasion of great festivities. Its monumental architecture aside, Chang'an was uniform in its layout and architecture, its daily life highly regulated. Two major markets, one East, one West, were walled as well and closely supervised. Market activities were necessary, but in the eyes of the ruling aristocracy, traders were déclassé.

By the end of the tenth century, however, during the Northern Song, the character of the city had fundamentally changed, as ordinary people were gaining open access to its streets. In the new capital Kaifeng, for example, the street became a 24-hour public place, with its colorful array of shops opening unto the main thoroughfares. More private residential neighborhoods were hidden from view in side streets, alleyways, and in some cities, such as Suzhou, along canals. Some of them continued to be gated and walled. Scattered throughout the city were numerous temples devoted to the rituals appropriate to the local deities that defined neighborhoods in the same way that village temples and shrines did for the territorial reach of local spirits in the countryside.<sup>8</sup>

Circumferential city walls remained, of course, and with the restoration of the Mandarin state in 1368, the Ming dynasty promoted a vast building program of walls whose principal purpose was to remind imperial subjects of the Emperor's awesome presence. Providing for defense was only a secondary objective. In addition, each walled city had at least two temples that were part of the official cult: one was devoted to the City God, who was the focus of a religion based on natural forces and ghosts; the other was the school temple, a center for the worship of sages and exemplars of civic virtue (Feuchtwang, 1977: 607). 'It was the rule', writes Feuchtwang, 'that an incoming magistrate, before taking up office, first seclude himself in the City God temple and report himself to the god, swearing an oath: 'If I govern disrespectfully, am crafty, avaricious, get my colleagues into trouble, or oppress the people, may the *shen* [you] send down retribution upon me for three years' (*ibid.*: 601). As the spiritual guardian of a territory, however, the City God was also venerated publicly as Heaven's delegate to the people and their ancestors. His annual birthday was a popular ceremony in which an image of the god was displayed and carried throughout the city (*ibid.*: 602).

Although walls marked the city as an administrative capital (county, prefectural, provincial, and imperial), its inhabitants, at least until the onset of modernization in the final decades of the nineteenth century, had no specific sense of being urban. Urban and rural folk alike shared roughly similar cultural beliefs and practices. In almost all cases, observes Mote, the county bore the same name as the city in which the administrative offices were located, and the entire county was governed by the same staff of civil service officials who were centrally appointed. Only rarely, he writes, were statistics preserved showing the number and conditions of urban residents apart from those of the entire county where the great majority were rural village people (Mote, 1999: 762).

Who lived in the city? Although variable according to time and place, a large portion of the population was composed of temporary residents or sojourners — artisans, merchants, laborers, boatmen, adventurers, and traveling scholars — whose primary identification was with their native place. As Skinner explains:

A person's native county commonly appeared on doorplates (and invariably appeared on tombstones) and was used in correspondence and *belles lettres* as a surrogate given name for prominent figures. The normative pattern was clear: a young man who left to seek his fortune elsewhere was expected to return home for marriage, to spend there an extended period of mourning on the death of either parent, and eventually to retire in the locality where his ancestors were buried . . . Residences were not immutable . . . but within the span of a few generations native place must be seen as an ascribed characteristic (Skinner, 1977: 539).

8 For a vivid account of Tang Chang'an and Song Kaifeng, see Heng (1999; 2006). See also Xiong (2000).

To be a sojourner, then, was to be someone who did not fully belong to local society, who was, as we might put it today, an alien. Differences in language, food, clothing, customs, and religious beliefs were constant reminders that they were, if even for extended periods, travelers away from home. Many of them, especially merchants and artisans, would join local guilds that frequently served as 'homeland' associations as well. As Golas observes, 'merchants and craftsmen in an alien city often had a clear economic stake in limiting a trade to natives of their particular region. Particularly when geographically based guilds divided a single craft or trade among them, they might well decide that their interest in gaining greater control over the trade and in securing everyone's livelihood dictated a merger into a single guild' (Golas, 1977: 564).

For the most part, guilds were powerful organizations (Rowe, 1984: Chapter 9). In addition to contributing to neighborhood services and even city-wide functions, such as firefighting forces, militia and charitable works, they spent heavily on temples, gardens, inns and other common facilities for their members. Maintaining native-place sentiment and the worship of home-area deities were important goals in establishing a guild (Rowe, 1984: 260). Most significantly, however, native-place associations guaranteed each compatriot a decent burial according to customary rituals and might even facilitate the transfer of his mortal remains to his native village where a tablet with his name inscribed on it would be placed on the family altar to be revered by kinsmen and descendents (Goodman, 1995: 6). Not to be buried properly and far from one's village meant to become a perpetual wanderer, a 'hungry ghost', a demon (*gui*) who would lurk under bridges and on roads, a constant danger to travelers.<sup>9</sup> A temple devoted to 'hungry ghosts' was typically erected outside the city walls where food offerings were made to pacify them and ward off their threats from those who lived virtuous lives within the walls. Counterpart to the demons who dwelled outside the walls of the city were the locality gods (*tudi gong*) who were territorial guardians whose worship took place in neighborhood temples and whose beneficence defined the boundaries of local areas.

Notable throughout the later imperial era was the internal division of the city into neighborhoods or streets, faint echoes of the walled wards of the Tang. In early twentieth century Shanghai, Hanchao Lu writes:

as far as daily life was concerned, Shanghai can be seen as a honeycomb consisting of numerous small cells — the compact, even crowded and multifunctional neighborhoods — where people conducted most of their daily activities. For most people, these were carried out in an area that stretched just a few blocks from their home... The city therefore was fragmented into numerous small communities wherein a life of moderate comfort could be obtained and maintained without venturing into the outside world — just a few blocks away. To many residents the few blocks around their homes were what the 'city' meant to them, and most of the city's much publicized modern amenities were quite irrelevant to their lives (Lu, 1999: 14–15).

Lu neglects to mention that many of these neighborhoods were also what we would call ethnic enclaves or, as one writer has called them, 'small social enclosures' (Goodman, 1995: 16). Similar characterizations of neighborhood life come to us from Chengdu, whose popular teahouses articulated the social and commercial life of the city until well into the 1930s (Wang, 2003). In both Shanghai and Chengdu, neighborhoods were frequently gated clusters of houses within an easy stroll to the local temple dedicated to the area's protective spirit.

Summing up, imperial cities were endowed with monumental architecture as symbols of imperial presence. Centered on the *yamen* and the temple of the city god, they were

9 Demons were thought to be the equivalent of vagabonds who 'were the constant objects of imperial surveillance and prescription, being agents of banditry and rebellion' (Feuchtwang, 1992: 99). Uprooted from their native place and of uncertain provenance, 'unworshipped ghosts', like bandits and rebels, had escaped the social controls of their home communities and thus were thought to pose a danger to the realm, just as today's 'floating' migrants, whose similar 'wanderings about' the countryside is often referred to as blind, and who are widely regarded as potential criminals.

firmly anchored in both temporal and spiritual authority. The city's internal divisions, its neighborhoods and wards that were often gated as well, were focused on local temples dedicated to popular divinities. Year-round celebrations helped to forge a strong sense of neighborhood solidarity.

Sojourners, who comprised the majority of the population, derived their identities from ancestral villages where they hoped to be buried lest they wander the face of the earth as 'hungry ghosts'. With the possible exception of local merchant elites who in late imperial times constituted an informal city government, urban identities were still relatively weak throughout most of the imperial era. While living in the city, sojourners' major points of reference were the many homeland guilds whose walled enclaves, often located beyond the city walls, allowed them to worship in temples dedicated to their native divinities, establish burial societies, celebrate homeland festivals, conduct business in their own dialect, and form close social relations for mutual help and acts of civic virtue.

Despite local variations, these place-making characteristics lasted throughout most of the imperial era. It is perhaps unsurprising that many of them, though by no means all, survived the collapse of the Qing dynasty, continuing to offer a sense of stability in uncertain times.

## Republican China

Demolition of walls; establishing an all-purpose city government; Sun Fo's urban planning manifesto; the first department store and the invention of rural backwardness; persistence of the city of wards

With the 1911 revolution, the millennia of the walled city came to an ignominious end. The fall of the Qing had drained the walls of their power to bestow meaning. Over the next few decades, most city walls were demolished for what were usually the most mundane of reasons, such as a street widening project or the removal of squatters' lean-tos just beyond the old city gates. Their power to define the city was gone forever.

With the dismantling of city walls during the next two decades, it was as if a dam had burst to give way to a flood of modernizing impulses across the former empire. No longer surrounded by walls, cities spilled unhindered into the countryside. With the authority of central government perpetually in question during the years of warlords, would-be emperors, Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang, Japanese invaders and civil war, a number of cities, following the examples of Beijing and Canton (Guangzhou), seized the day to establish for the first time in China's history an urban government, a 'city hall'.

The Guomindang government, which had established itself in the southern city of Nanjing, would eventually attempt to regularize the new urban regime that had been a predominantly informal system of governance. Municipal offices in Beijing, for example, were formally set up as late as 1928, when the central government, acting in familiar imperial tradition, appointed a mayor who would oversee the operation of eight bureaus, including public security, social affairs, public works, public health, finance, education, public utilities and land (Strand, 1989: 224). It was the police, however, that absorbed the lion's share of the budget.

In Canton, Mayor Sun Fo was an enthusiastic advocate of 'scientific' planning. In an essay published in 1919, he argued for the virtues of a scientific approach that would lay out the city's future as an exemplary model.

Sun Fo pronounced that 'investigation' and 'survey' constitute essential tools for urban planning. The scope of investigation, he wrote, should cover every aspect of society and the economy. It must contain all the facts that can be put in statistical form. To construct an urban center, investigation should be made of the population in the area, the different occupations of the residents, the nature and quantity of local products, and the amount and variety of present and future trade. In addition, surveys must be conducted . . . It is clear that Sun Fo saw critical



linkages in these different sets of data. Again, the emphasis is on producing accurate statistics, which in turn requires a well-equipped official organization as well as detailed thorough investigation (Tsin, 1999: 23).

Here was a manifesto of a new technocratic order about to descend on China. At the beginning of the 1920s, urban planning, according to Sun, had three major objectives: to prepare a city for the communication needs of the future, to improve its sanitation needs, and to provide open spaces for recreational use. Its ultimate aim, however, was more ambitious: 'to transform the conditions in which people ordered their everyday lives by reaching into the realms of their daily practices, right down to the level of hygiene and patterns of entertainment' (*ibid.*: 24). Scientific planning, Sun believed, would force people to become modern.

For young urbanites, becoming modern was indeed a heady prospect. With the Manchu dynasty gone, the hated queue which Han Chinese had been obliged to wear as a symbol of colonial submission was quickly abandoned. And in another gesture of rebellion — this time against male domination — the modern urban woman no longer had her feet crippled and bound and would stride freely, energetically . . . like a man. The more daring among them might even adopt western clothing! New modes of public amusement such as the cinema and ballroom dancing became all the rage among those able to afford them. New ideologies — science, democracy, socialism — pushed ancient verities aside and became subjects of intense debate in tea rooms, on broadsheets and in newspapers. The city itself underwent a dramatic physical transformation as new public spaces and imposing European-style buildings appeared, such as leisure parks, cinema palaces, train stations, government buildings, department stores. Roads were widened and paved to make way for streetcars and buses that had to compete fiercely with desperate rickshaw pullers whose livelihood was at stake.<sup>10</sup> While the old ways might still survive in sheltered back alleys of the city, 'main street' was electrified with the excitement of the new (Lee, 1999).

The story of the Sincere Department Store will need to stand here for all that made this period irresistible to many. In the fateful first year of the new Republic's founding, Sincere also established its first store in Canton. An earlier store had been opened in Hong Kong, but for China this was a new institution. As Michael Tsin describes it:

Sincere became an instant landmark of the metropolis: mecca to the residents of the city and its surrounding areas with its exhibition of an often bewildering range of commodities, which were nevertheless always divided into neatly arranged categories. Its system of management was borrowed directly from its Western (and Japanese) counterpart, with its clear bureaucratic hierarchy and division of labor mixed with a strong dose of 'paternalism' designed to engender unswerving loyalty to the company. The Sincere store was five stories. Towering by the standards of the day, it featured, in addition to an impressive array of merchandise, an open-air amusement park on its top floor, which carried regular performances of opera, acrobatics and movies. The store proved to be a prime attraction (Tsin, 1999: 25).

Sincere not only became a landmark but symbolized one of the new dimensions of the republican era: the tentative beginnings of the bourgeois city of consumption. Less than 40 years later, Mao Zedong would seek to erase its memory and replace it with his own vision of a socialist city. The Sincere department store also signaled the invention of rural backwardness in China. As Tsin observes: 'The creation of a discrete "urban" *entity and identity* for Canton was to be an early republican phenomenon' (*ibid.*: 22, my emphasis). Tsin's account is limited to a single city, but this sense of the city as distinctive from the general run of places could for the first time be extended to all of China's major cities. Intellectuals might debate these matters in their journals, and resistance to the bourgeois city was certainly vociferous but, in this instance, facts on the ground were more persuasive than words (Mann, 1984; Lu, 1999: 8–13). As the new

<sup>10</sup> According to Strand (1989: 21), some 20% of Beijing's population in the 1920s depended for their survival on rickshaw pulling.

buildings reached skyward and migrants flocked to them from the impoverished countryside in hopes of a better life (Shanghai in the 1920s was already a metropolis of three million that would soon grow to five), it was inevitable that rural life came to be viewed as hopelessly retrograde, a sort of negative space. As many modernizing urbanites saw it, the countryside stayed mired in the past.

This emphasis on the 'modern' obscures the fact that only a small minority of urbanites could actively participate in this new world. Most people continued to live, as they had always done, in their row and courtyard houses which Esherick calls 'the small spaces of home and alley and neighborhood', complete with temples, teahouses, annual cycles of religious festivals, and their distinctly pre-modern ways of life that, after all, were not very different from those of the small towns and villages from which most of them had come (Esherick, 1999: 13).

By the end of the republican era, more than a million Shanghainese (roughly 20% of the local population) were living in squatter settlements on the city's fringes, under bridges, and in other obscure places conveniently 'out of sight' (*ibid.*: 14).

The empire's wall and moat city was gone now, its place taken by the bourgeois city of consumption with its seemingly limitless possibilities, its professional government, and that symbol of its modernity, the department store (Yeh, 2000). Particularly in the poorer districts of the city, the old neighborhoods persisted as did their temples that housed the territorial divinities, the tea houses, the celebration of year-long rituals in honor of the gods. As for the traditional countryside, it was widely perceived as culturally backward. The ways of villager and urbanite were no longer cut from the same cloth.

## The People's Republic I: Mao Zedong

The Herculean task to create a modern socialist society; the three-tier organization of urban neighborhoods; de-urbanization; creating a two-class society: the imposition of the household registration system; industrialization without urbanization; Mao's vision: a city of work units; attacks on popular religion

The Republican city did not last very long. After 1937, its continued flourishing was arrested by the bitter war against the Japanese invaders and the civil war that would doom it. The next 12 years of bloodshed and turmoil left no part of the country unscathed. Life continued, but China's early experiments with capitalist-style development were aborted. When order was finally restored and the country was again unified, the People's Republic would no longer tolerate the opium dreams of a bourgeois city. A Spartan regime of forced-march industrialization was about to commence that would build a brave new city of production. Under the leadership of the Chinese Community Party (CCP), the individual — never the atomistic individual of western society, but closely tied into the network of family and clan with its mutual responsibilities — would be replaced by collective institutions and harnessed into a gigantic project of national mobilization. Sun Fo's dream in the 1920s that urban planning would 'force people to become modern' would now be undertaken on a much larger scale in the name of the Party-state. For the next three decades, China would become a thoroughly mobilized society, as societies sometimes become mobilized for war, lurching forward according to how the winds blew from headquarters in Beijing.

The decade of the 1950s was decisive. As millions of peasants streamed into coastal cities from the ravaged countryside, the Party-state determined that this situation had to be reversed, once and for all. Because a speed-up of China's industrialization was the number one objective, it would have to be financed largely from internal savings — and, in a country of peasants, such savings would have to be derived primarily from work in the collectivized countryside under the management of the CCP. For its part, the city had similarly to be brought under control.

In one of the early decisions, a three-tier system of neighborhood management was devised, consisting of so-called Street or Neighborhood Offices which, in turn, supervised a number of Residents' Committees (a mass-line organization) consisting of 100–700 households. Below these, individual households were organized into mutual responsibility groups similar to the traditional *baojia* surveillance system which, as an idea and sporadic practice, had existed since the Qin dynasty more than 2,000 years earlier but had rarely been implemented successfully.<sup>11</sup>

China's innovative experiment under Mao was to industrialize the country *without* incurring the heavy costs of urbanization. Between 1949 and 1960, the urban component had doubled to nearly 20% of the total population. In the following decade, however, this figure was stabilized at around 17%, as millions of young urbanites were sent 'down to the countryside' in an effort to deurbanize China's large cities and avoid the embarrassment of large numbers of educated but unemployed youths.

The principal means for holding back urbanization, which everywhere else in the developing world was proceeding at double and even triple the rates of natural increase, was the imposition of a national system of household registration. This policy, enacted as early as 1955, accomplished what it set out to do, but it also created a two-tier society consisting of a majority of agricultural workers who would live in communes (83% of the population) and a minority of urban workers (17%) who, as the historically privileged class, would enjoy access to virtually free housing, food subsidies, free education, free health care, along with other material and symbolic advantages: a version of socialist heaven. Registration cards (*hukou*) assigned 'peasants' to their respective communes where their *hukous* were held collectively, while urbanites were issued individual registrations. In effect, this made China's peasants prisoners of their communes, so that seeking work in the city was not, for most, a realistic option unless one was specifically recruited as a 'temporary' worker by an urban work unit (*danwei*). This rigid system, in which there were neither labor markets nor significant horizontal mobility, worked because the city rationed grains as well as fuel, and one couldn't survive there except as a possessor of an urban *hukou* that entitled one to ration coupons. Housing was similarly unavailable to potential migrants unless they had permission to live (and work) in a *danwei* (production unit). In short, one's life chances overall were a product of the household registration system (Solinger, 1999; Wang, 2005).<sup>12</sup>

The *danwei* were at the core of Mao's vision for a socialist city of production.<sup>13</sup> Department stores, such as Canton's 'Sincere', would be replaced by state-run enterprises that sold only standardized items of essential use. Henceforth, all production units — units of government, schools, hospitals and, above all, factories — would be enclosed by walls and thus become a socialist city in miniature where individual needs for dwelling, food, and leisure time pursuits would be met collectively. In theory at least, one would have little reason ever to leave the *danwei*. From birth to death, one would work and live there. All of one's significant social relations would be enclosed by its walls. As in the wards of Tang China 1,500 years earlier, these walls would define who you were.<sup>14</sup>

11 The *baojia* system was based on an idealized group of 10 neighboring households that were headed by a trusted person who, in turn, would respond to the next hierarchical level composed of 10 neighborhood groups (100 households, or approximately 500 persons), and so on up until one reached the lowest level of governmental authority, which today is called the Street Office and which in rural areas is equivalent to a township. For the origins of *baojia* and the related *hukou* system, see Wang (2005: Chapter 2).

12 The *hukou* system used the 'native place' syndrome in Chinese culture, which is probably one reason why there was so little resistance to its introduction.

13 In the countryside, its equivalent was the People's Commune.

14 For a fascinating account of the *danwei* system and its genealogy, see Bray (2005). Bray's approach is from the perspective of Foucault's concept of 'governmentality'.

That a single socio-spatial pattern could ever define the city of the future has proved to be a statist fantasy. For a while, however, it seemed as though it would succeed.<sup>15</sup> No other patterns were anywhere in view, and the few that remained would fall under the hammer. One of the chief targets of the glorious Proletarian Cultural Revolution which Mao unleashed in the mid-1960s were the temples of the popular religion and the guardian spirits that watched over neighborhoods defined not by the state (as was the *baojia* system) but by spiritual beliefs and practices beyond its reach. Cultural revolutionaries saw in them nothing but ‘folk superstitions’ that would have to yield to a system of beliefs validated by ‘science’. As potential sources of resistance to CCP leadership, they would have to be ‘smashed’. Youth gangs swinging red banners savaged temples and ridiculed believers wherever they could. But inevitably, as is so often the case with popular culture, temple neighborhoods survived in villages and even in some cities, resurfacing as soon as Red Guards’ revolutionary fervor had calmed down, opening the way to the reform era that followed.

Following Deng Xiaoping’s ascendance to power in 1978, the commune system in the countryside mutated into the officially sanctioned ‘responsibility system’, while in the city, although the *danwei* continued as an organizational form, its power to control workers’ lives was greatly reduced, as workers and employees were re-housed in high-rise apartments beyond work unit compounds.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the unfinished project of the republican city has sprung back to life, reverting to its former character as, at least in part, a city dedicated to consumption, only this time under the benevolent gaze of the CCP, newly enlarged with an infusion of capitalist money.

## The People’s Republic II: reforms in the 1980s and 1990s

A socialist market economy; hyper-mobility and urban expansion; the unsettling experience of displacement; place-making in Zhejiang Village; the invention of ‘community construction’

In the new socialist market economy, the potency of the *hukou* system to limit spatial mobility gradually diminished and, little by little, the government was forced to relax its position on urban migration. Legally, and in many cases illegally, tens of millions of rural workers came to work in cities and peri-urban villages, often outnumbering local residents. To accommodate this new population — still officially considered ‘sojourners’ but visibly staying on in constantly rising numbers — new housing had to be built. Some housing took the form of dormitories attached to specific industries, but there were also shoddily constructed and ill-serviced apartments built to be let out by villagers turned rentiers, while on numerous construction sites, housing was often no more than a barracks that could be knocked down in a few minutes. Regardless of this structural temporality of the housing environment, the built-up area of the city crept steadily outwards, absorbing former rural villages that stood in its path. Before long, cities in some parts of coastal China, such as the Pearl River Delta, began to grow into each other, creating a continuously urbanized landscape.

Cities were thus changed beyond all recognition as millions upon millions found themselves displaced from familiar neighborhoods which, together with social relations and the rhythms of their daily lives, often vanished without a trace. In their stead rose:

glittering office buildings and skyscrapers in the financial district and CBDs, foreign retail outlets and shopping complexes, clustered suburban villas and downtown condominiums, development zones, high-tech, university and science parks, dilapidated workers’ villages and migrant enclaves. These spatial elements can be read individually but together they piece out a large picture of post-reform spatial production (Wu and Ma, 2005: 268).

15 At its highpoint in 1975, nearly 80% of China’s urban workforce was enrolled in a *danwei* (cf. Bray, 2005: 144).

16 Homeownership in urban China at the beginning of the twenty-first millennium had reached 80%.

Like its capitalist counterpart in the West, the Reform era city has become the site and expression of the desire for unlimited accumulation, and urban place identity has become chiefly a matter of city marketing, of branding cities (Wu, 2000). Even the preservation of heritage areas, such as the few remaining *hutong* in Beijing, is now more a matter of tourist promotion than a shared, deeply felt sense of place. Despite recent enthusiasm for heritage preservation, China's urban economy is on a historical trajectory of complete commodification (Wu and Ma, 2005).

Still, place-making is an ongoing process, and despite the enormous changes that urban areas are undergoing, familiar patterns continue to assert themselves. A major new place-making site is on the peri-urban terrain where city and countryside meet. Zhejiang village is one of the best studied of these new migrant settlements on Beijing's southern periphery (Zhang, 2001; Leaf and Anderson, 2005).

Zhejiang Province, from which these migrants came, lies to the south of Shanghai, and most of them had their native places in the vicinity of Wenzhou, a city famous for its entrepreneurial panache. Eager to make their mark in the nation's capital, migrant entrepreneurs began arriving in significant numbers soon after the onset of market reforms in the 1980s, arranging lodging with local peasant families in the Dahongmen area of Fengtai District, where they launched themselves into clothing manufacture for the local market. Word spread, and soon Beijingers would flock on weekends to Zhejiang village looking for bargains. But as more and more Wenzhou people decided to seek their fortune in Beijing, the new Zhejiang community began to be maligned in the media. In the popular press, 'floating migrants' were said to be 'out of control'. Responding to increased police harassment, the Zhejiangers decided to relocate their complex household activities inside newly constructed compounds they called *dayuan* (big courtyard houses). The largest of these brick-built *dayuan*, housed up to 6,000 people (Leaf and Anderson, 2005). With gates that could be locked at night, *dayuan* were in effect a kind of walled ethnic enclave. But the Zhejiangers had miscalculated. In 1995, public authorities declared their presence in Dahongmen illegal, and their workshops and housing were ruthlessly destroyed.

This is not the end of the story, however. After complicated negotiations between Zhejiang spokespersons and District authorities, the miscreant sojourners were eventually allowed to return. A modern trade building named Jingwan — a contraction of *Beijing* and *Wenzhou* — was constructed with state support, and today the more than 100,000 Zhejiangers outnumber locals five to one. Municipal officials from Wenzhou have set up an office in Dahongmen to look after the interests of their countrymen, much as a consulate might do in a foreign city. Zhejiang Village, of course, is not so much a foreign as an ethnic enclave of 'sojourners' whose many-stranded links to their native place remain vital and, at least for the time being, undiminished.

The multiple forms of displacement that followed in the wake of ongoing reforms — the end of cradle-to-grave security in *danwei*, massive lay offs in the remaining state-owned enterprises, massive urban migrations, villages overcome by encroaching urbanism, and the general commodification of life — posed worrisome challenges to both party and state. Means had to be found not only to maintain control over the ongoing processes of spatial restructuring in its many forms — physical, economic, socio-cultural, and politico-administrative — but also to ensure the delivery of critical social services to the most vulnerable among the (urban) population — the elderly, unemployed, veterans, the disabled. How the Party-state responded to this challenge offers insight into the 'deep structure' of state–society relations in China.<sup>17</sup>

17 The following account is based primarily on a 3-year, 14-city study carried out for the Ford Foundation by Allen C. Choate of the Asia Foundation (Choate, 1998). For a more recent account that takes the story to the end of 2002 and thus to the end of Jiang Zemin's rule as CCP chairman, see Derleth and Koldyk (2004). A more theoretically informed article by Feng Xu (2005) presents yet another version, but lacks empirical evidence. The *shequ* experiment is perhaps still too recent to allow for a balanced judgment of its intention and concrete accomplishments.

As early as 1986, the CCP issued a circular that called for the strengthening of Residents Committees (*jumin weiyuanhui*) — a hold-over from the Maoist period — to contribute to what the party called *shequ jianshe*, community construction. ‘This first call for a community services policy that was community-based’, writes Choate, ‘set the tone and direction for the ensuing period up to the present. The goal and the watchword is Community Construction’ (*ibid.*: 11). Three years later, this was followed by the law on the Organization of the Residents Committees of Cities, a further step in intensifying their role as community service providers rather than primarily keepers of social order (*ibid.*).

‘Another landmark was reached’, continues Choate:

when the revised 1993 Constitution contained specific provision mandating both Villagers and Residents Committees. This had been preceded that same year by a major policy paper, ‘Accelerating Community Service Development,’ issued jointly by no less than 14 ministries and State Council commissions. That joint policy paper, reinforced by a Ministry of Civil Affairs circular in 1994 urging even greater efforts in community construction, forms the basis and provides the impetus and guidance for China’s current push to create community-based social services and social security facilities (*ibid.*: 11–12).

In practice, this top-down version of ‘community construction’ didn’t, of course, work out quite as the government had intended. ‘For an increasing number of urban dwellers . . . the Residents Committee has become less relevant . . . There are many urban areas . . . where the Committees simply are not functioning [as of 1998] beyond the minimal requirements’ (Choate, 1998: 16). Democratic elections for Committee leadership positions announced in writing are in fact often manipulated by Street Office cadres and above; there is little enthusiasm for the government’s call for volunteers to carry out the multiple functions assigned to Residents Committees; public funding of local services is inadequate so that such services have to be rendered on a sliding fee basis; and neighborhood priorities are often quite different from the mandated list. In many neighborhoods with functioning committees, the emphasis is on crime prevention (*ibid.*: 17–18) and the provision of ‘daily life services’ (*ibid.*: 23).<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Civil Affairs has undertaken a huge physical construction program to provide suitable spaces for the work of Residents Committees throughout China, even as the number of such committees is being reduced through territorial consolidation to achieve economies of scale. By the end of the millennium at least in Shanghai, ‘community’ (*shequ*) was being defined as the equivalent of a Street (Neighborhood) Office (*jiedao banshichu*) with a population of 50–100,000, while Residents Committees *within* Street Office areas are now termed ‘micro-communities’ with a population of from 3,000 to 6,000 (*ibid.*: 29). Major service facilities are therefore being built at Street and District levels, while grassroots initiatives increasingly focus their own activities on running collective neighborhood enterprises whose proceeds help finance some of the service functions assigned to their care. An estimated 70% of committee funds are reported to come from their own off-budget sources.

The future of this state-managed effort to build (or rebuild) territorially based ‘communities’ remains an open question. Actual experiences vary a good deal among cities and even within a single city. The new neighborhood offices built under the auspices of the Ministry of Civil Affairs are almost always woefully short of funds; their legal status is ambivalent; the CCP has been instructed to take control and oversee their operations; and popular apathy is high (Derleth and Koldyk, 2004: 766–8). Though more benign than the ancient *baojia* system that was the original model for structuring local

18 ‘Included are the following Committee-operated services: a) neighborhood take-away and delivery “fast-food” restaurants; b) public telephone counter . . . ; c) temporary domestic help . . . d) various forms of shuttle transport . . . ; e) bicycle and auto parking areas; f) a range of neighborhood shops such as hairdressers, bicycle repair, electrician and plumbing repair, grocery stores, and other specific retail services requested by residents’ (Choate, 1998: 23).

'self-governance', it is a serious effort to encourage urban neighbors to attend to their own social needs within the broad policy framework of the state, while moving gradually to a more professional approach in the management of their own activities. Although popular, self-generated community actions, as we saw in the case of Zhejiang village, are officially discouraged because they are not state-backed initiatives, agents of the Party-state dream of a national system of territorial communities (*shequ*) operating more or less in lock-step, as they enthusiastically devote themselves to carrying out the national mandate. Whether this project is likely to be embraced by China's rapidly globalizing society remains an open question.<sup>19</sup>

Summing up, then, the last 25 years of the socialist market economy have changed the face of China, as coastal cities have become feverish construction sites. Each year, tens of millions of farm migrants — men, women, entire families — are on the move, looking for work in the rapidly urbanizing regions from Liaoning in the North to Yunnan in the South and Chongqing in the West. After a few years of working in construction, factories and menial services, many return to their home communities, while a new generation of migrants takes their place and cities relentlessly expand, engulfing rural villages on their periphery. In many cities, economic growth continues to soar at double digit rates. Migrants find accommodations in overcrowded dormitory housing; those working on construction jobs live on the site in makeshift arrangements; and families rent rooms from local villagers on the urban periphery. New middle-income households move into high-rise apartments built by their work unit, becoming first-time homeowners at subsidized prices, while the wealthy retreat into gated communities complete with private swimming pools. Meanwhile, the central city is being hollowed out. Old neighborhoods are razed to make way for garish high-rise office buildings, in-town luxury apartments, Hong Kong-style malls, and five-star hotels that might be anywhere and nowhere (Augé, 1995). Increasingly congested flyovers carry the heavy traffic of cars and trucks at a snail's pace. Life has become seriously unsettled and disorienting. The comforting sense of place has yielded to incurable construction fever.<sup>20</sup>

Contemplating this 'restless landscape', the central government fears social chaos. Meant to regulate the physical city, master plans have been made mandatory but remain largely meaningless exercises as urban spaces are transformed at a far faster pace than it takes to draw them up. For its part, the Ministry of Civil Affairs is seeking to regain control over the hyper-mobility of millions of rural migrants, unemployed older workers, discharged army veterans, new homeowners discovering and claiming their rights, neighbors from inner-city alleys displaced into the periphery, and frustrated first-time job seekers, by activating what some interpret as a new-fangled version of the tried-and-true but only intermittently effective *baojia* system of mutual surveillance and help. Street Offices and Residents Committees are being assigned new responsibilities but given limited resources in an attempt to construct new territorial communities from the top down amidst perceived urban turmoil. But the ebullient spirit of the new city, restless as the landscape itself, is unlikely to submit to heavy-handed Party-state control. Place breaking is in full swing and is not likely to abate. Making new places out of this wreckage remains only a distant promise.

## Findings and reflections

Our rapid survey of 1,500 years of place-making in urban China was informed by a particular understanding of place. This understanding, grounded in Henri Lefebvre's

19 According to David Bray (2005: Chapter 7), it is the hope of Ministry of Civil Affairs planners that, over time, local residents will identify with their *shequ* just as they had once identified with their work unit (*danwei*), and that this experiment in community construction would lay down the new spatial and moral order of the sprawling city and, by extension, of the country as a whole.

20 For an excellent account of city building in the reform era, see Wu *et al.* (2007).

concepts of everyday life and 'lived space', may be summarized in seven general propositions.

- 1 Place-making in urban China, but not only in China, results from the intersection of the state with the everyday life of the people. The state not only decides on the physical form of the city — its layout and planning — but also on the rules and regulations that govern its life. For their part, the people's everyday life tries to make itself 'at home' in the small spaces of the city. Thus, throughout history, place-making has always been a social process fraught with reluctant obedience to authority, popular resistance and displacement.
- 2 Absolute material space is transformed into places by being lived in, thus acquiring a name and identity. In the small spaces of the city — its neighborhoods or wards — habitation leads to observable patterns and rhythms of everyday life that are centered on local institutions where the daily rituals of life are performed, creating new subjectivities. These local institutions may be characterized as places of encounter. Some of them are public, such as a government office, an open-air market or park; others are typically supported by some among the local population, such as a temple, mosque or parish church; still others are privately owned, including tea rooms, coffee houses, pubs and similar locales where people like to come together.
- 3 Although patterns and rhythms of life persist, places are not forever. With the passage of time, they undergo changes, a result of population movement, aging, new construction, demolitions, floods, warfare, new technologies and customs, along with a myriad of other causes.
- 4 For many inhabitants, the rituals of daily life are a source of comfort to people, offering a sense of security and stability, as neighbors encounter each other, exchange greetings, strike up friendships, pass along gossip or deal with emergencies. They are a source of their attachment to place.
- 5 But the apparent autonomy of neighborhood life is illusory. Locally, the agencies of the state have both a visible and invisible presence through its system of licensing and permits, its regulations concerning both licit and illicit activities, forbidden behavior, the standards imposed on constructions, traffic flow, the provision of public services, the activities of police and auxiliary guards, social workers, and inspectors, surveillance cameras, and so on.
- 6 State actions affecting neighborhood life are often contested and may be overtly resisted. But because they tend to affect members of the community in different ways, state actions are often divisive, turning neighbor against neighbor. Interests in mixed neighborhoods (and the degree of attachment to place) are diverse, and a common ground cannot be assumed.
- 7 Under conditions of contemporary life, the importance of neighborhood-based places in people's lives tends to diminish as social networks extend beyond the limits of the small spaces of the city and contact with neighbors becomes progressively more impersonal. Efforts by the state to re-impose a territorial order based on an imaginary of the self-regulated small spaces of the city are therefore likely to fail.

I turn now to the specifics of Chinese cities in this survey, singling out for comment the more salient aspects of place-making I have covered.

### Walls and gates

Rebuilt in part by the first Sui emperor in the late sixth century, Chang'an, the City of Everlasting Peace, was a city of walls. Its outer perimeter of rammed earth measured 37 km, and visitors entered the city through one of its many gates, some of which were surmounted by imposing towers. Within this fortified perimeter, the walled palace city was located to the north. Aristocrats and commoners alike lived in the *fang*, or wards, that were separated by wide avenues. The wards were similarly surrounded by walls with gates that were closed at nightfall (Friedmann, 2005: 3).



Walls and gates have always been symbolic markers of place in China. As Yinong Xu explains:

From a Chinese perspective, an architectural space had to be defined nominally *and* physically, so that it could be distinguished both in concept and in reality from other spaces of different categories, defined likewise, and so that the human environments could be maintained in order. The most convenient and probably preferable way to accomplish this materially was to enclose the space with walls.

What seems to have been distinctive was (and still is) the ubiquity of various kinds of walls in China's landscape . . . Walls in China, in fact, became an important part of the vehicle used to distinguish different categories in an ordered human environment, and the social and conceptual function of walls outweighed their physical function of defense and obstruction; that is, they have physically bounded the spaces that they enclosed, but more importantly they symbolized the manner of classification in the organization of society (Xu, 2000: 196–7).

Walls define particular human relationships, he writes, and different places require conduct appropriate to the function to which the enclosed space is dedicated. Furthermore, the frequently observed cellular character of Chinese social space, from courtyard to region, is undoubtedly related to this desire for a universal criterion of order, within both the visible and invisible worlds.

There were walls surrounding palaces and neighborhoods, walls that set off the administrative compound of the county *yamen*, walls enclosing courtyard houses, and the walls of guild compounds beyond city walls. In modern times, work unit (*danwei*) compounds were walled and gated, some contemporary urban neighborhoods have at least a gateway spanning the street through which one enters and exits, and the same is true of the gated luxury housing estates being built in the peri-urban areas of large eastern cities today. Walls may have the function of keeping miscreants out, but more importantly, Xu argues, they serve as a symbol of the spatial ordering of life.

### The order of Heaven

If the *yamen* represented the temporal order of the city and its surrounding countryside during the imperial era, City God and School God, each residing in his respective temple, were part of the Heavenly or spiritual order in which the city was anchored. The veneration of both divinities was approved by Confucian officialdom, the first, because he stood for the emperor's mandate from Heaven, the second because he represented scholarly virtue. Both were thus directly tied into the governance structure of the city.

Temple gods of popular religion protected life in urban neighborhoods and were tolerated though not approved by officialdom, most of whom considered popular religion a form of vulgar superstition. Be that as it may, neighborhood temple cults were a vital focus of neighborhood life. Territorial deities had local names. Their abodes were maintained by local associations that also organized the cycle of festivities, ritual celebrations and opera performances which throughout the year brought the celebrant community together, reinforcing a sense of collective identity. Indeed, one could say that neighborhoods were informally governed by a civil society which had the local temple as its center (Fällman, 2004). *Tudi gong*, the local place divinities, have survived into the modern era. But with the new mobility and the erasure of countless neighborhoods to be replaced with vertical housing, private estates and the transnational spaces of capital accumulation, it is no longer clear to what extent they can continue to serve as the focus of collective life in the new settings where communities will have to be regrown from the start.

### Teahouses and the rituals of everyday lives

Places are typically small — the enclosed wards of Tang Chang'an are an early example — and are formed through the rituals of everyday life. The teahouse culture of Chengdu,

which lasted from the late Qing dynasty into the modernizing period of the Republic, is an instance of how the round of daily rituals created a public culture despite repeated attempts to control behavior regarded as inappropriate for a city of the new century.

As late as the mid-1930s, Chengdu's many teahouses served an estimated 120,000 patrons daily. Archery lovers, bird fanciers and opera aficionados would frequent them to discuss the finer points of their hobbies. A few of the larger shops distinguished themselves by offering theater and opera performances in addition to serving endless cups of tea to their customers. Merchants would use their favorite teahouse to negotiate business deals. Various personal services such as fast food or barbering would be offered to the clientele by an ecology of ambulant traders who clustered around the larger teashops or made their way from one to the other across town. Servants, short-term laborers, and coolies could be hired on the spot.

Regardless of social class, both men and women frequented Chengdu's tea emporia. According to the guide book *New Chengdu*, teahouse goers would 'tell ancient and modern stories, comment on society, play chess, gamble, criticize public figures, investigate private matters, and gossip about the secrets of the boudoir' (Wang, 2003: 95). 'If a man felt, hot', Wang continues, 'he could strip to the waist. If he needed a haircut, a barber could be summoned to his seat . . . He could take off his shoes and have his nails clipped by a pedicurist. If he was alone, he could eavesdrop on other conversations or join in if he preferred. He could stay as long as he liked. If he had an errand to run, he could simply move his cup to the middle of the table to signal the waiter to "hold it" until he returned' (*ibid.*). One of the daily teahouse dramas was 'drinking settlement tea', which was the mediation of civil conflicts over issues of daily life, such as verbal abuse, debts, property disputes and even violent incidents, in plain view of the tea drinking crowd that had assembled to watch the proceedings and perhaps express their approval or disapproval of the charges being made (*ibid.*: 99–100).

With the arrival of modernizing zealots, Chengdu's lively civic spaces began to be criticized for their leisurely pace, their unhygienic practices, their licentious talk. In the late nineteenth century, soon after the establishment of a police force in the city, the first 'Regulation of Teahouses' was published, and in the early Republican period popular teahouse culture came under direct attack (*ibid.*: 157). Despite these measures, actual or threatened, Chengdu's teahouse culture continued to flourish until the coming of the People's Republic when these 'spaces of civic freedom' were finally subdued.<sup>21</sup>

### Sojourners, floaters, and native place

From the seventeenth century onward, the majority of a city's population consisted of so-called sojourners, people who had come from elsewhere and were considered (and thought of themselves as) only temporary residents. In this pre-industrial age, many of them belonged to native place and/or professional guilds (Rowe, 1984: 277). Sojourners always found it difficult to become fully integrated with the established social order of the city. After years of living in the city, some might adopt local customs as they became more solidly anchored in local life. But easily identified by their native dialects, local suspicions were always rife that sojourners could not be trusted, that their behavior was insufficiently refined. Native-place guild compounds ensured a haven from a city that was ambivalent about their presence. They offered an opportunity to worship native divinities, the conviviality of others from their places of origin with whom they could converse in their own dialect, and the assurance that if the end should come, they would be properly buried, their bones returned to the places from which they had come.

In the present era, migrant sojourners are coming to the city in larger numbers than ever, only to be dismissively referred to as 'floaters', a term suggesting an uncertain

21 After 25 years of reform, Chengdu's tea culture is again in full swing. There are now hundreds of operating teahouses in that city (personal information, Laurence J.C. Ma).

past, an unreliable present and an unknown future (Solinger, 1999). It is only in their home villages and towns that floaters can command the rights to which they are entitled, and (perhaps most important of all) where they can expect to have their name inscribed in their lineage hall, an object of eternal devotion. But in the places where they actually live and work, all they can expect is the ingrained hostility of the locals. Gradually, the authorities might begin to make some gestures towards the education of their children, and even provide for the basics of life, but this is primarily a matter of local discretion, not general policy. Unless they can obtain an urban *hukou* for an exorbitant fee, they will continue to live as 'floaters' who may be tolerated but not loved.

### The erasure and rebuilding of place-based communities

The destruction of places — entire cities, neighborhoods, urban villages — is a familiar story. Floods, earthquakes, fires, conquest have all contributed their share. Modern instances of erasure are more insidious. In the early decades of the Republic, when imperial walls were torn down, the way was cleared for the city of unlimited accumulation. Appropriate symbols of the new order were quick to arrive. I chose to draw attention to the Sincere department store which became a Canton landmark in the 1920s. But landmarks are not places in the sense that I have used the term here. Like the movie palace on its topmost floor, Sincere served an exclusively commercial purpose: movies provided entertainment made in distant studios for a non-specific audience, the department store enticed a well-to-do class to buy imported treasures or imitations of such treasures from abroad. The Sincere was a harbinger of the transnational shopping malls that were yet to come; it was a 'non-place place' (Augé, 1995).

Mao imposed a new spatial order in the 1950s and 1960s that would put a stop to the incipient city of unlimited accumulation and its other face, the city of consumption. Urban migration from the countryside was halted and even reversed; rural villages were collectivized and combined into teams, brigades and communes; and the fluid open city of consumption was reconfigured into the more or less self-sufficient cells of the work unit (*danwei*). *Danwei* gave people a strong work-place identity, but the patterns and rhythms of life were controlled by the party, and they were nothing like the civic places of earlier times.

This utopia of the socialist city of production lasted a mere quarter century. The *danwei* survived but ceased to be a total institution as workers found housing outside their walls. With the onset of the reforms in the 1980s, bulldozers started to plow up the old city centers. Millions of migrants moved again from interior localities to coastal cities, finding accommodations in the rural industries that were springing up everywhere on the urban perimeter, soon to be joined by transnational investors from Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan. Early in the final decade of the millennium, the Shanghai government decided to create a whole new urban district across the Huangpu River known as Pudong. Actually, the district was already home to about a million people, most of whom were farmers supplying the city with fresh food. But planners paid little attention to this inconvenient fact as they drew up their blueprints, freely earmarking spaces for export production zones, an international airport, a 'golden' financial center, a technology district, and expressways across the landscape as though Pudong were a *tabula rasa* (Yeh, 1996).

So the old places are disappearing, while new ones are not yet formed. Much of the drama is played out in the urban periphery where farming villages are being overrun by rural migrants who have come to work in local factories, wealthy inner-city residents are buying themselves into walled estates with auspicious names such as Beverly Hills, and middle-income yuppies are coming to live in high-rise condominiums to live out their fantasies next to rice paddies. Land may still be collectively owned by aging villagers, but what is emerging on the city's edge is clearly a new urban district that does not conform to any master plan; it is a city growing by accretion.

To perceived chaos such as this, the state is responding with a two-pronged strategy. Spatial order is to be symbolized by mandatory master plans, and many cities, from Beijing and Shanghai on down to smaller localities, now spend small fortunes on elaborating three-dimensional models of the city which are then displayed in planning 'museums' that allow visitors to marvel at the wonders yet to come. Social order is to be reconstituted through 'community construction', as Beijing makes funds available to build neighborhood service centers throughout the country. The hope is that these centers will help strengthen the sense of place that is basic to the imaginary of territorial communities.

### The uneasy relation between state and civil society

Historically, the state in China has always had a visible presence in place-making. The walling of administrative cities and the veneration of official deities are classic examples. The state-led effort currently under way to create territorially based communities in urban neighborhoods across the country is a contemporary example. But equally important is the presence of a robust, self-organized civil society, particularly at the level of urban neighborhoods. We have seen instances of this in Chengdu's tea house culture and the neighborhood temple associations that create a fluid order of ritual events throughout the year.

The relation between state and civil society has always been an ambiguous one in urban China. Literati no less than Communist cadres declared popular religion superstitious but tolerated its practices; Chengdu's police force was incapable of tightly regulating the city's teahouse culture; mass relocations in the course of urban re-development have been fiercely resisted. Based on arguments borrowed from Jürgen Habermas, western scholars have expressed doubt whether 'civil society' is an appropriate designation for Chinese forms of self-organization (Brook and Frolic, 1997).

In general, it can be said that throughout imperial history, Chinese commoners had more state-imposed obligations than rights. Particularly in rural areas, they had to pay exorbitant tax levies, do *corvée* labor, and serve in the military. They were imperial subjects rather than modern citizens. Still, it was civil organizations — guilds, temple associations, etc. — that helped in numerous, mostly informal ways to govern the city without much interference from above so long as imperial authority was not challenged.

One might suppose that all this would have changed with the Republican era, but habits are hard to shed; they become part of the culture. The novel idea that the Chinese people were also citizens of their country, and that citizenship entails certain rights and entitlements, not merely duties, had difficulty being accepted (Bergère, 2002). In any event, the issue was rendered moot during the People's Republic. The Party-state carried its hegemony to an extreme never before realized, extending its control in both city and countryside to the minutest, most intimate details of civil life.

Many, though by no means all of these controls were lifted or disregarded in the post-Mao period when elements of the traditional mode of local governance were gradually reintroduced by relying on the ability of 'civil society' at neighborhood levels to manage itself. At least, this was the hope of Beijing bureaucrats who invented the territorial community of *shequ*. But the Party-state soon grew fearful that the reforms it had set in motion were getting out of hand and that unless controls were reintroduced, chaos (*luan*) would threaten. It was partly this fear that led the State Council in 1984 to promulgate China's first City Planning Ordinance which mandated the drafting of master plans that, it was hoped, would ensure that chaos could be contained, spatial order preserved. Twenty years later, the law is still on the books, master plans are still drawn up, and cities grow helter-skelter, regardless.

The second strategy was begun around the same time, when the Ministry of Civil Affairs first floated the idea of 'community construction' that would formalize not only the delivery of social services to vulnerable groups but also help stabilize social life in the new neighborhoods. Early experiments in community construction led to new

regulations authorized by the state council that are now being implemented. What the community construction program will accomplish remains to be seen. Since it is inadequately supported by budgetary transfers down the hierarchy of offices, it is by no means clear that the Ministry's expectations will be fulfilled any more than master plans have succeeded in imposing a spatial order on the structural transformation of cities.

## Concluding comments

Place-making in today's China is a contested process. The city is filling up with immense, architect-designed, non-place spaces, from airports and subways to luxury hotels, office towers and suburban malls. But as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz has written, 'no one lives in the world in general' but in localities where human ties and familiar landscapes give rise to sentiments of place, providing shelter against the vicissitudes of life. Some years ago, I expressed a similar thought, a defense of the small spaces of the city (Friedmann, 2002: Chapter 5). But the *zeitgeist* is against us: in a globalizing world, mega-projects trump the small, humanized spaces of the city most of the time.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, there is much to be learned about the actual processes of place-making and breaking in Chinese cities. Both are potentially rich topics for research. The community construction program being implemented by the Ministry of Civil Affairs is one such topic. Another is popular resistance to the erasure of places. A third and very promising topic is the revival of popular religion in the new urban neighborhoods on the periphery of cities about which very little is actually known. A fourth is the question of the actual role of an emerging civil society in the formal and informal arrangements of neighborhood governance. These and related topics should be enough to keep a generation or two of graduate students occupied over the next 10 years.

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<sup>22</sup> To balance this pessimistic conclusion, see Sorensen and Funck (2007) on the slow progress in mobilizing civil society in Japan for neighborhood governance. In Japan's highly centralized state system, it has taken decades for participatory governance structures to emerge. Periodic crises which contributed to the de-legitimization of the central bureaucracy generated small bursts of reform that eventually led to a more decentralized, neighborhood-based system of urban planning. But institutions in China, of course, work differently and will undoubtedly have different results.

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## Résumé

*Cet article traite des petits espaces de la ville qu'on appelle des 'lieux'. Les lieux sont modelés par la vie qui s'y déroule; ce sont des espaces de rencontre où se jouent les petites histoires d'une ville. Bien sûr, ils sont aussi façonnés par l'Etat, à travers l'aménagement, le contrôle, les règlements, etc. Les modèles et rythmes de vie dans les petits espaces urbains ne sont donc pas une projection pure de la vie civique. Ce sont aussi des scènes de résistance, de contestation et d'actions souvent jugées illégales par les autorités (locales). Après le concept de lieu, l'article présente une réflexion sur les lieux et leur fabrication (ainsi que leur fracture) dans la Chine urbaine. Les modèles et rythmes de la vie urbaine présentant une continuité, l'approche appliquée à leur étude est historique. Le récit rapporté se décompose en quatre grandes périodes: la Chine impériale, la Chine républicaine, la République populaire de Mao Zedong et l'ère réformatrice depuis 1980 environ. L'article revient ensuite sur les concepts de lieux et de fabrication de lieux en résumant les résultats obtenus et en suggérant quelques thèmes de recherche à approfondir.*