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Ritualizing the City

Collective Performances as Aspects of Urban Construction
from Constantine to Mao

Edited by Ivan Foletti and Adrien Palladino

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Antonio Lavarello

Beijing as a Built Ritual

Introduction

Before getting to the main topic, it is useful to make some introductory remarks about the methodological perspective of the following paper. It is important to make the fields of interest clear, as well as the kind of doctoral research they come from. It represents a partial and “collateral” product of a doctoral thesis entitled *Transformations on the surface and deep continuities in architectural culture of contemporary China*, which focuses on issues of contemporary architectural theory and culture, rather than on strictly historical issues. While it can be partially considered an architectural history research project, it is a «history of immediate present», according to the Anthony Vidler’s definition:¹ although it is treated with the necessary precision, history is used as an “instrument” to define a theoretical and cultural status for contemporary Chinese architecture.

The second remark is partially linked to the previous one: the paper is not particularly focused on the specific characteristics of ancient – or contemporary – Chinese rituals, but, in a wider perspective, on the role of ritual more generally considered, within the definition of the structure of Chinese imperial cities. In this respect, Beijing represents one of the most evident and relevant cases.

Chinese Cities and Rituals

The urban structure of Chinese imperial cities was generally based on a diagram in a canonical book of Confucianism, written during the period dominated by the Zhou dynasty (1046-250 BC). The book, entitled *Rites of Zhou*, is not a specific architectural treatise, but a far more general text about the complex ceremonial, administrative and political structure of the Empire. However, it established many aspects of the cities and buildings within the cities: the layout and the characteristics of the road system (strictly orthogonal),

1. Anthony Vidler, *Histories of Immediate Present. Inventing Architectural Modernism*, Cambridge-London 2008.

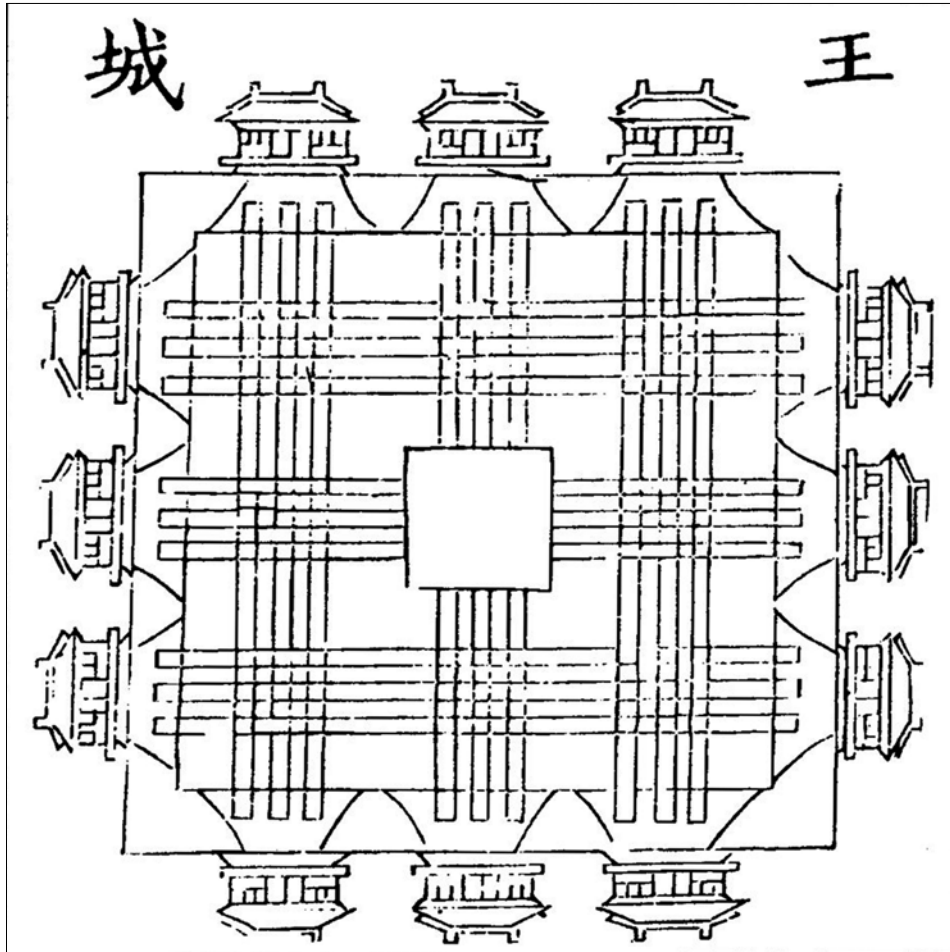


Fig. 1: Diagrammatic plan of the city of Chengzhou (Wangcheng) as represented in the *Xiding Sanlitu* treatise (12th century).

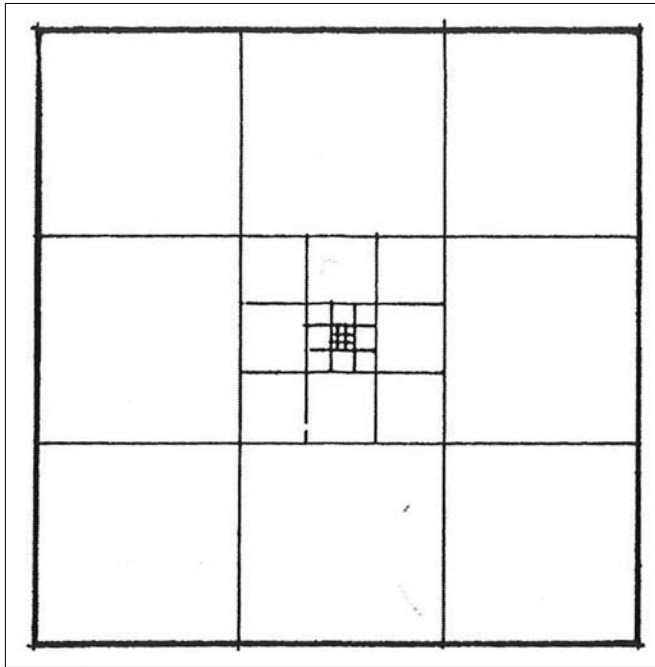


Fig. 2: Diagrammatic scheme of the subdivision of the Chinese Empire as a series of decreasing mandala (From Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* [n. 12], fig. 58).

the size (depending on the city's importance in the hierarchy of the Empire) and the position of the most important temples.² The ideal city described in the *Rites* was square, subdivided into nine squares, entirely surrounded by a wall with twelve gates, three on each side. The square's sides were oriented to the cardinal points [Fig. 1]. At the centre was the imperial palace, which itself was enclosed and followed the same framework, at a smaller scale. The shape of the city came from the Chinese idea of macrocosm and also coincided with the framework of the state and society: ritual, inspired by the cosmic cycles,³ and with it the city and the architecture, condensed – in time and space – a holistic concept [Fig. 2]. The physical space, made sacred by rituals and the symbolic meanings of architecture, acquired a political and civic value. For instance, “staying inside” (the city, the Empire) meant being a proper Chinese person, to “get out” meant losing one's membership not only in the community, but also to the entire human race.⁴ This self-similarity at different scales – the imperial

2. Alfred Schinz, *The Magic Square: Cities in Ancient China*, Fellbach 1996; Nancy S. Steinhardt, *Chinese Imperial City Planning*, Honolulu 1999.

3. Marcel Granet, *La Pensée Chinoise*, Paris 1968, pp. 80-81.

4. *Ibidem*, p. 82.

city was nothing but a microcosmic reiteration, as faithful as possible, of the macrocosm, as was a building, at a lower dimensional and hierarchical rank – allowed the ancient Chinese language to use some words in a very free and ambiguous way. For instance, the combination of characters *yu-zhou* (space-time), meant both “universe” and in some cases, “building”. *Ji* could mean both border of the Empire and threshold of a house, and also *yu* and *shi* were used both for “state” and “house”. So the imperial palace in Beijing is the Forbidden City, a city within the city.⁵

Immanence

In Chinese classical culture, city and architecture were not just symbols of a higher order, but this order unfolded tangibly in them. François Jullien, a French philosopher and sinologist, dedicated a book to the relationship between *tao*, its meanings and its predicates,⁶ in comparison with the Western concept of *logos*. Unlike the Greek *logos*, which always refers to a meaning and is always *legen ti*, “to say something”, *tao* doesn’t need anything external to refer to, according to an immanent approach to reality. There is no *Other*: everything is included in the internal relationship between *yin* and *yang*.⁷

In Chinese thought, there is no *absolute* Other either; there is no God to give attributes or predicates to. The *tao* is the hub of the wheel, it never rotates, it is the cavity inside the pot, the nothingness of a door through which you can pass. It is subtraction and absence, and consequently it is not predictable nor attributable. For David Hall and Roger Ames, two American philosophers who worked on the relationship between Western and Chinese philosophies, the Western concepts of transcendence and absoluteness are «almost irrelevant» in China.⁸ For Marcel Granet, a sort of father of French modern sinology, «Chinese thought refused to distinguish the logical from the real».⁹ Similarly, the ideograms do not refer to the meanings in absence – on the contrary, they make the meaning present and living, creating a sort of immanence.

Ancient Chinese cities also represented a form of immanence: cosmic order, but also political and social orders, were present within them and couldn’t be separated from them. The character of Chinese built space – buildings, cities, gardens – can be defined as symbolic only when referring to a strictly etymological sense of the term: it really *holds together* (from the Greek *syn-ballo*) the relative and absolute, the big and little. If the symbol allows «the continuous exchange

5. Jin Feng, *Beyond Form and Structure. A Study of the Paleographic and Poetic Reflections of the Meaning and Experience of Chinese Architecture*, Ann Harbor 1993, pp. 21-23.

6. François Jullien, *Parlare senza parole. Logos e Tao*, Bari 2008.

7. *Ibidem*.

8. David L. Hall, Roger T. Ames, *Anticipating China. Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture*, Albany 1995, p. XIII.

9. Granet, *La Pensée Chinoise* (n. 3), p. 26.

between macrocosm and microcosm»,¹⁰ this exchange is a sort of closed circle, similar to the *tao*.

In order to understand the relationship between the city, ritual, the Empire and cosmology, we can refer to the interpretation of Taoism given by British scientist, historian and sinologist Joseph Needham, in his fundamental work *Science and Civilization in China*.¹¹ According to Needham, magic, which in Taoism is the ultimate meaning of things, is internal to things themselves. The self-similarity at different scales of the cosmos doesn't mean that microcosm is dependent on macrocosm; it means that the *tao* organizes both, without being an external and conscious principle.

One of the most relevant examples of this coincidence of different levels – in such a way that these levels are no longer discernible – is the Ming t'ang, the “Hall of Calendar” or “Hall of Light”, an important building erected by the emperors in each capital city, particularly during the Tang and Zhou dynasties. In the Ming t'ang, whose layout was based on a square divided into nine squares, something very similar to a Buddhist *mandala*, the entire universe was condensed, so that the emperor could give a ritual character to his own existence: within the building, he performed codified movements carried out at specific times, wearing specific liturgical vestments. Even the food, utensils, music and the sentences he pronounced had a symbolic value. The rites that the emperor carried out in the Ming t'ang corresponded both to the visits he was required to conduct every five years to the peripheral territories of the Empire in order to trace its borders, as well as to his static presence at the centre of the Empire – of the world – for the other four years, in order to animate Time and Space. The term «omology» (between man, building and cosmos) used by Adrian Snodgrass in his *Architecture, Time and Eternity*¹² seems to be appropriate for this kind of relationship between ritual and reality, ritual space and time and real space and time. The rituals that took place in the Ming t'ang were supposed to have a real effect on the existence of the world, as Snodgrass points out.

What Clifford Geertz wrote about religious rituals, in his essay about «religion as a cultural system», seems particularly valid for Chinese architecture. They are not only models *in* which you can believe, but they are also models set up *in order* to believe; beyond being the representation of a specific religious perspective, they constitute its realization and materialization. «They are not representations of anything, but presences», wrote Geertz.¹³

10. Guglielmo Bilancioni, “I Cardini celesti dell'architettura sacra”, preface to Adrian Snodgrass, *Architettura, tempo ed eternità*, Milan 2004, pp. XI-XXV, XV.

11. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China 2: History of Scientific Thought*, Cambridge 1991.

12. Adrian Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity: A Studies in the Stellar and Temporal Symbolism of Traditional Buildings*, New Delhi 1990.

13. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York 1973, p. 118.

Ritual, Efficacy and Diagram

Within traditional Chinese culture, the use of diagrams held a very relevant role in the union between macrocosm and microcosm, ritual and urban design, as noted by Yi-Fu Tuan in his *Topophilia*:

Cosmic symbolization in the design of cities found more explicit expression in China than perhaps in any other civilization. The Chinese imperial capital was a diagram of the universe.¹⁴

The importance of diagrams in Chinese culture is exemplified by the *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes*, written during the Zhou dynasty (12th-3rd century BC). It is a canonical book acknowledged by both main streams of Chinese thought, Taoism and Confucianism. The most significant content of the *Book of Changes* is a series of diagrams: sixty-four hexagrams, each one based on two trigrams, sequences of three lines, continuous when they refer to *yang* and interrupted when referring to *yin*. Every hexagram is followed by a short and often ambiguous comment. There are several relevant implications of the *Book of Changes*' trigrams in the architectural field, analysed in-depth by Snodgrass in *Architecture, Time and Eternity*,¹⁵ especially with regard to the Ming t'ang mentioned above. This paper will not focus on these specific issues, but it is important to underline the deep connection between ritual, building and diagram [Fig. 3].

Even ancient construction manuals used diagrammatic drawings, for instance, in order to show complicated wooden joints, as we can see in the plates of the *Yingzhao Fashi*, a book from the Song dynasty (11th century), perhaps the most important text for the Chinese art of building [Fig. 4]. However, it is also possible to find something similar in contemporary manuals, like «architectural recipes», as Rem Koolhaas called them, providing ready-made generic plans for skyscrapers¹⁶ for the bulimic and tireless Chinese building industry [Fig. 5].

The use of diagrams can be related to the Chinese understanding of «efficacy», as described by François Jullien who, following Marcel Granet's remarks about Chinese pragmatism, tried to analyse the different approach to the correlation between action and theory in China and in the Western world. Jullien shows this difference starting from military doctrines: on one side, Western strategy, represented by Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz, on the other side the «art of war» described in works like those by Sun Tzu or Sun Bin (but also in Mao Zedong's *On Protracted War*).¹⁷ While Western strategy stubbornly pretends to fit a variable situation into a fixed frame through a focused action, the Chinese leader is inspired by nature. He pursues invisible, global, progressive, continue

14. Tuan Yi-Fu, *Topophilia, a Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*, Englewood Cliffs 1974, p. 166.

15. Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* (n. 12).

16. Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, Sze Tsung Leong, *The Great Leap Forward/Harvard Design School Project on the City*, Cologne 2002.

17. François Jullien, *Pensare l'efficacia in Cina e in Occidente*, Bari 2008, p. 49.

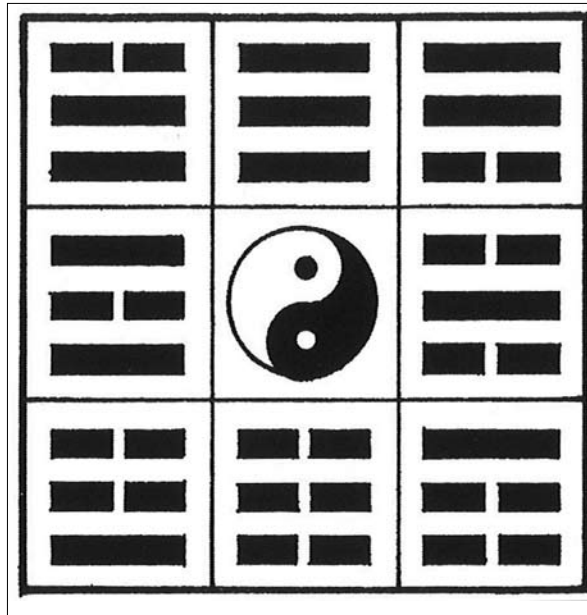


Fig. 3: The trigrams and the Ming T'ang rooms (From Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* [n. 12], fig. 65).

transformations (and not actions) and he seizes opportunities when they arise. According to Sun Tzu, victory is the evident result of a long, hidden activity; when the conditions are not propitious, the wise leader must refrain from acting, waiting or even retreating. Jullien also presents more contemporary examples of this attitude, such as the Long March of the Communist Army (1934-1935). It is meaningful that the most important, heroic and celebrated event that led Mao to his victory against the Kuomintang was a sort of strategic retreat, necessary in order to recover positive potential. He also mentions the Vietcong guerrilla, based on a similar approach. Moreover, Jullien, in his work about efficacy, explains how Chinese managers still conceive of the signing of a contract: it is not a crucial event to make something previously established real, but rather just one phase of a long evolution, and not necessarily the last or most important one. Transactions go on until the manager believes that the potential of the situation is really positive, often creating some problems in commercial and financial relationships with Western economic operators.¹⁸

Basically, while efficacy is based on the application to reality of an abstract model previously defined through theoretical speculation in Western culture, in

18. *Ibidem*, pp. 59-61; similar remarks can be found also in the work of the social psychologist Richard Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently [...] and Why*, New York 2003.

Chinese thought, on the contrary, the behaviour of the wise man is based on his awareness of surrounding conditions and the potential they offer. Therefore, while it is not possible to find an idea of strategy based on a linear relationship between action and theory, model and reality in China, we can suppose that the analogous concept of “project” – which has become more and more important in Western architectural culture – holds different importance and meaning in the Chinese context.

In fact, if we look at the traditional Chinese art of construction, we notice that the space for an architectural project, squeezed between cosmology and craftsmanship, tended to zero; in disappearing, the project became a “process”: impersonal, holistic, collective, and for the most part extra-architectural. The construction of a building was a sort of long «silent transformation», borrowing the title of a work by François Jullien about the Chinese conception of time and history.¹⁹ The process started with territorial and administrative planning and went on to the continuous maintenance of individuals buildings, through the substitution of wooden elements or repainting. For this reason, many of the terms in ancient Chinese referring to building activity, for instance *jing* or *ying*, had a broader meaning, covering also planning and management. Together with the project, the architectural designer also disappears, compressed on one hand by the divine power of the emperor, founder of the city, and on the other hand by the practical know-how of the carpenter.

While the space for the architectural project was squeezed between cosmology and craftsmanship, these two levels could directly touch one another in the diagram, in *feng shui* practices, as Puay-peng Ho wrote:

The geomantic form of the topography is often given a name, such as ‘fish’ or ‘crab’ formation, and many folk beliefs are related to the character of the formation. In construction manuals, fengshui principles are simplified into diagrams showing the auspicious or undesirable effects of placing a house close to different landscape elements such as a rock, a river, a tree, or a fork in the road. Such simplified guidelines allow the chief carpenter to act as geomancer and lessen the overall cost.²⁰

The imperial cities’ ritual diagram, already described, also represented an example of the Chinese approach to efficacy, playing the role that, in Western culture, has been held by proper urban planning, through its capability to adapt to variable environmental conditions and to exploit the potential of a specific place without losing its cosmological essence, as noted by Spyro Kostof: «[...] in Chinese architecture it is the ritual and its diagrammatic plot that endure, not the actual physical structure».²¹

19. François Jullien, *Le trasformazioni silenziose*, Milan 2010.

20. Puay-peng Ho, “China’s Vernacular Architecture”, in *Asia’s Old Dwellings. Tradition, Resilience, and Change*, Roland Knapp ed., Oxford-New York 2003, pp. 319-346, 323.

21. Spyro Kostof, *A History of Architecture. Setting and Rituals*, New York-Oxford 1985, p. 232.

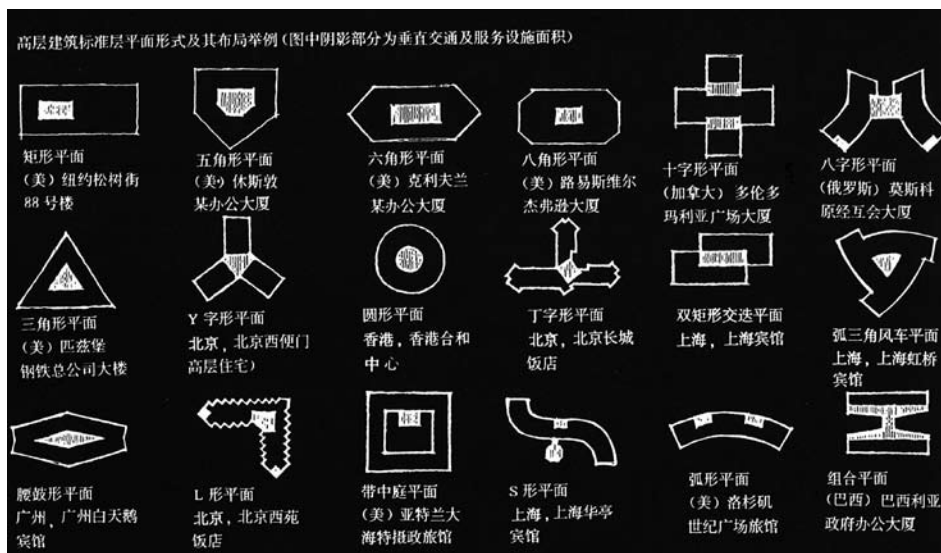
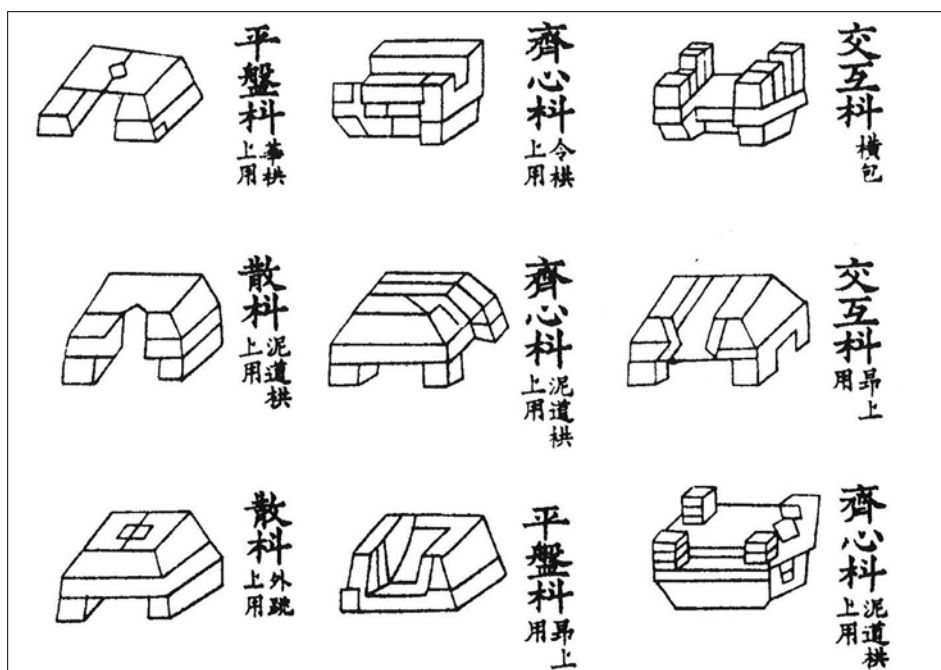


Fig. 4: Wooden joints from Yingzao Fashi (mortises in brackets) (Reported from Jiren Feng, *Chinese Architecture and Metaphor: Song Culture in the Yingzao Fashi Building Manual*, Hong Kong 2012, fig. 4.18).

Fig. 5: Architectural recipes for high-rise building (Reported in Chung, Inaba, Koolhaas, Tsung Leong, *The Great Leap Forward* [n. 16]).

Etiquette

Like imperial rituals, Chinese classical architecture was also based on a large *corpus* of rules – ceremonial, political, ethical, social as well as technical – that transferred the obsession for behavioural codes, mainly related to the Confucian component of Chinese thought, to the field of building construction. This led Marcel Granet to affirm that Chinese life is dominated by etiquette.²² With regard to the relationship between etiquette and construction, we can quote an essay by Puay-peng Ho about Chinese vernacular architecture:

The use of space within houses generally followed closely the Confucian code practiced within society at large [...]. Thus it was clear that the physical environment of the dwelling was a vivid and concrete embodiment of the social order²³

and *The History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* by Spyro Kostof:

Rectilinearity and axiality – these were the operative principles of Chinese design. And with them went the horizontal aesthetic, the conscious preference for a uniform range of heights that shifted the environmental burden of social distinction to the placement of buildings in the general scheme of the city, the level of the terrace on which they invariably stood, the area they covered, and the degree of their ornamentation. All of these were officially prescribed. Han sources set down the specific code, based on status, that controlled where a house was allowed to be in its *fang* or neighborhood, how big it was to be, and how involved its design.²⁴

Beijing as a Built Ritual

The plan of Beijing also comes from the *Rites of Zhou* diagram mentioned above. Not directly, but through a long series of cities preceding it, almost in the same place, with different names, depending on the dynasty that built them.

The first significant urban settlement was Ji (1100 BC). Then came another Ji, the capital of the Kingdom of Yan, during the Warring States period (453-221 BC) and Youzhou, during the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD). Other important cities followed: Yanjing (founded in 937), the southern capital of the Liao, a dynasty from the north, Zhongdu, 1153, capital city of the Jin dynasty from Manchuria and Dadu, the “big capital city”, founded in 1267 by Kubilai Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan and first emperor of the Yuan dynasty. Dadu was visited in 1275 by Marco Polo, who described it in his book *Il milione* [Fig. 6].

It is interesting to briefly mention how the foundation of Dadu represents a clear example of the previously stated tension between diagram and context. Compared to the city that came before it, Zhongdu, Dadu was moved slightly

22. Granet, *La Pensée Chinoise* (n. 3), p. 41.

23. Ho, “China’s Vernacular Architecture” (n. 20), p. 328.

24. Kostof, *A History of Architecture* (n. 21), p. 231.

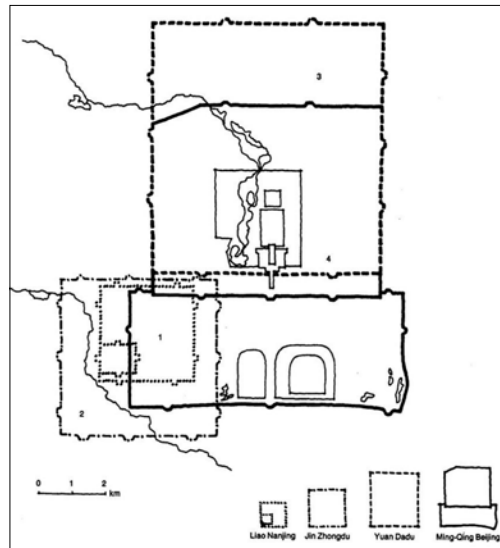


Fig. 6: Beijing through history drawn by Huang Yusheng (From Steinhardt, *Chinese Imperial City Planning* [n. 2], fig. 19).

northeast. Kubilai Khan decided to change its position in order to build it in the same area as some large reservoirs dug by the Jin, including them within the walls of Dadu. Therefore, the regular geometry of the ceremonial layout had to deal with the organic shapes of the lakes, artificial but with a natural appearance; even the imperial palace itself was asymmetrical, in order to partially include a reservoir. This combination between a diagrammatic perpendicular grid and curved and organic contours generated all the exceptions, singularities and discontinuities that characterized the city in the following ages and that, enriched by Ming and Qing urban interventions, are still a very interesting and fascinating aspect of Beijing.

The Ming dynasty (founded in 1368) conquered Dadu and called it Beiping, “Pacified North”. In 1403, Beiping became the new capital of the Ming dynasty, replacing Nanjing (the “Capital of the South”) and taking the new name Beijing, “Capital of the North”.

The long sequence of different cities maintaining approximately the same layout, though destroyed and rebuilt every time, in a sort of ritual of time and space regeneration, seems to confirm Kostof’s statement quoted above: «it is the ritual and its diagrammatic plot that endure, not the actual physical structure».

A paradigmatic case of perfect coincidence among cosmology, ritual and urban form is represented by the monumental north-south axis that cuts Beijing, connecting the Forbidden City to the Tiantan, the Temple of Heaven, built during the Ming age and situated in the southern part of the city.

A long sequence of relevant architectural episodes crosses the city from South to North [Fig. 7]. It starts with three external gates (Yongdingmen, Zhengyangmen,

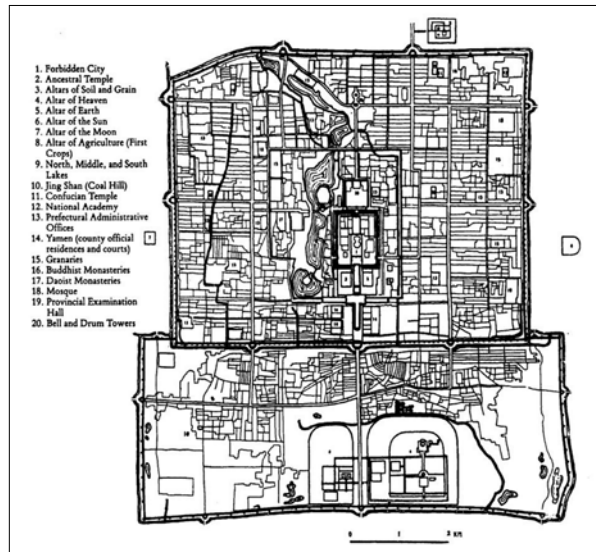


Fig. 7: Plan of Beijing, from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries showing imperial and administrative buildings (Reported in Steinhardt, *Chinese Imperial City Planning* [n. 2], fig. 2).

Daqingmen), each composed by a group of different buildings [Fig. 8]. Then come the proper gates of the Forbidden City: the well-known Tiananmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace leading to a long court, closed by the Wumen, followed by another big court with five marble bridges crossing a small canal. The third gate is the Taihemen, the Gate of Supreme Harmony. Inside the gates, there are two groups of three palaces each: the first, more public and official, is composed by the Taihedian, the Zhonghedian and the Baohedian; the second, separated from the first by another gate, the Qianqingmen, is more private and consists of the Qianqingong, the Jiaotaidian and the Kunningong.

The sequence seems to end inside the Forbidden City, with the imperial gardens and the Gate of Divine Power, but continues outside, northward with the Jingshan hill, built by the Ming using the soil from the newly excavated trench around the walls – a perfect *feng shui* protection from northern negative energy – and followed by the Dj’anmen Gate and the Drum and Bell Towers [Fig. 9].

The long axis marked by an impressive series of monumental buildings is not only a visual connection or a geometrical composition. Every winter solstice, it was physically traversed by the emperor, “the Son of Heaven”, who went to the Tiantan to pray and make sacrifices, in order to ensure favourable climatic conditions for the Empire. The ceremony, much older than the building itself and linked with the ancient pre-eminence of the south end of the city, included a massive procession, which was attended by all the members of the imperial entourage, according to a sequence patterned on rigorous Confucian etiquette. Looking at different representations of that topical ceremony, both from Western and Eastern artists,



Fig. 8: Zhengyangmen (1419): archery tower (left) and gatehouse (right), Beijing (Photo A. Lavarello).
Fig. 9: North-south axis: view toward North from the Jingshan hill, with the Gulou (Drum Tower) on the background, Beijing (Photo A. Lavarello).



Fig. 10: Isidore Stanislas Helman, *Ordinary Procession of the Emperor of China When He Visits the City of Beijing*, three copper engravings, 1786. British Museum, London (© The Trustees of the British Museum).

we can notice that there was a clear intention of giving a shape, a geometrical order to the various human and animal components of the procession [Fig. 10]. The buildings and open spaces along this ceremonial axis seem to “beat the rhythm” of the advancing procession, as if they were pauses and accents. The rhythm also marked the inverse movement, the gradual approach to the emperor by the few who were allowed to cross the wall of the Forbidden City [Fig. 11; Plate 16].

The urban sequence is not a «fixed scene», as Aldo Rossi²⁵ would have said, for the rituals. It is another, parallel, realization of the same immanent principle. The layout of the buildings reproduces the hierarchic framework of the imperial procession. People, vehicles, animals and buildings follow an order that is social and cosmological at the same time: the urban sequence is a sort of – with an oxymoron – static procession, a frozen ceremony. Humans are treated like architecture, “built”, “constructed” according to a geometrical layout, while buildings are considered individuals participating in the ritual, and predisposed according to a similar pattern.

Thomas Campanella²⁶ underlined how the end of the long ceremonial axis inside the Forbidden City does not feature a particularly monumental building – *Taihedian* and *Zhonghedian* are not so different from the other pavilions – but instead the emperor himself. It confirms the perfect concurrence of ritual and architecture, and also the idea of processional architecture.

The military units and their equipment, the dignitaries and the citizens are placed, dressed and conducted according to rules which act on a scale that is incomprehensible to the individual, who becomes an atom whose position is always relative to the whole and to the other components, and never absolute. Likewise for single pavilions within the traditional palatial or temple complexes, as noted also by Li Zehou in his history of Chinese aesthetics, *The Path of Beauty*.²⁷ There is a clear

25. Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, Cambridge-London 1982.

26. Thomas J. Campanella, *The Concrete Dragon. China Urban Revolution and What it Means for the World*, New York 2008, pp. 94-95.

27. Zehou Li, *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, New York 1995.



Fig. 11: *Portrait of an official in front of the Forbidden City*, hanging scroll painted in ink and colours on silk, Ming dynasty, 16th century. British Museum, London (© The Trustees of the British Museum).

connection with the relevance of the collective dimension in Chinese thinking and culture, which was – and still is – much more important than the individual one. The single building and the single person must always acknowledge the prevalence of the system they are part of, losing their autonomous identity in order to contribute to the collective harmony: a very important concept for traditional Chinese culture. We can, incidentally, underline that even ancient Chinese language had similar characteristics: short words that composed phrases could be used indifferently as nouns, verbs, adjectives just by changing the pronunciation, and only the general syntactic construction allowed one to determine the exact meaning. The single word had no meaning without the whole, just like the single pavilion within a big palace, or the single person within a collective ritual.

Contemporary Rituals

The doctoral research the present paper comes from intended to follow the deep tracks that connect – surprisingly – contemporary China to its ancient tradition. This is why the last part of the paper tries to deal with more recent phenomena, placing them in the same perspective.

Although the city of Beijing went through extensive and strong transformations during the twentieth and the beginning of twenty-first century, it still maintains an important link with the ritual dimension of power. After the Civil War (1927-1950), Mao Zedong established a sort of “urban contradiction” to the imperial north-south axis previously described, opening a new east-west axis, very long and extraordinarily wide: Chang’an Avenue.

The two axes – the ancient and the new, the imperial and the communist – meet in front of Tiananmen Gate, a place that Mao recognized as crucial to power and where the first communist liturgy took place, with the proclamation of the Republic in 1949. There, the communist regime set up its most important ritual space, the huge Tiananmen Square, destroying a number of imperial buildings, in order to create a 43-hectare void, 500 meters wide and more than 800 meters long. The destruction itself may have been intended as a ritual act, similarly to what happened to the ancient imperial capital cities with every change of dynasty. The buildings that surround Tiananmen have a great importance in terms of the physical and symbolic presence of power. On one side we have the Great Hall of People [Fig. 12; Plate 17], on the other side the National Museum of Chinese History [Fig. 13]. On the central axis of Tiananmen Square is Mao’s Mausoleum.

Within this new space, the People’s Republic of China organizes its most important ceremonies, in particular large triumphal parades, like the one that took place in 2009 for the 60th anniversary of its foundation. In this kind of parade, people, things and buildings are submitted to a collective order, in a way very similar to the ceremonial processions of the emperor, with a similar relevance of the geometrical control of the different components of the parade. Individuals are just atoms, as previously stated, and Tiananmen is a big «theatre of puppets», as



Fig. 12: Zhang Bo, Great Hall of People, Tiananmen Square, Beijing, 1959 (Photo A. Lavarello).
Fig. 13: National Museum of Chinese History (former China Revolutionary History Museum),
Tiananmen Square, Beijing, 1959 (Photo A. Lavarello).

architecture historian Dejian Sudjic called it in his book about the relationship between architecture and power.²⁸

One can observe the same submission of the individual to the collective in the choreographic opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, curated by the movie director Zhang Yimou. It is important to emphasise, in order to show the deep continuity between the new and ancient political rituals, that the Olympic Games took place in a new Olympic Park, built at the end of a long northward extension of the imperial north-south axis [Fig. 14].²⁹

In many movies directed by Zhang Yimou, like *Hero* (2002), we find a similar fascination with impressive mass scenes that work like big mechanisms. If we look at them within this conceptual framework, the soldiers and civilians in Tiananmen, the dancers in the Olympic Games' opening ceremony, the warriors in Zhang Yimou's movies do not seem so different from the Chang'an (the current Xian) burial army, created by the Emperor Qin Shi Huang (3rd century BC) for his tomb. These thousands of terracotta soldiers, horses, carriages and servants represent the idea of art as the perfect realization of a cosmic, social and political order, imposed indifferently on animate and inanimate elements – so indifferently that men and sculptures are interchangeable: like the «puppets» mentioned by Sudjic or to the «dolls» used by Italian writer Giorgio Manganelli (who wrote very interesting pages about his visit to China) as analogies to describe the character of Chinese people, not just in imperial China, but also under the communist regime.³⁰

In conclusion, we can briefly mention the importance that Tiananmen Square, precisely for its role as urban representation of political power, takes on for “counter-rituals” or, more precisely, for rituals of protest against power itself. All the most important demonstrations against the communist regime took place in Tiananmen, culminating in the tragically famous 1989 protests, which resembled a dramatic and violent ritual, a sort of collective sacrifice. In 2013, Tiananmen was also the place of a suicide terrorist attack, probably linked to the Uyghurs independence movement, when a car crashed near the big portrait of Mao.³¹ In 1995, Ai Weiwei, one of the most important contemporary Chinese artists – and also an architect – photographed his hand sticking the middle finger up to Tiananmen Gate. This picture, which started the series *Study of Perspective*, was replicated in other meaningful places, such as the White House in Washington and the Reichstag in Berlin, and represents another sort of counter-ritual, an artistic gesture which tries to “exorcise” the presence of power [Fig. 15].

28. Dejian Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex: How the Rich and Powerful Shape the World*, New York 2005.

29. The master plan of this urban intervention was designed by Albert Speer Jr., grandson of the Albert Speer who was the main architect of Hitler's Third Reich; incidentally we can mention that the elder Speer also designed a big monumental axis for Berlin.

30. Giorgio Manganelli, *Cina e altri Orientali*, Milano 2013, pp. 39-40.

31. Three people inside the car were killed, as well as two tourists, and thirty-eight people were injured.



Fig. 14: Modern extension of the north-south axis: view from the Zhonglou (Bell Tower) toward north with the Olympic Park on the background (Photo A. Lavarello).

Fig. 15: Ai Weiwei, *Study of Perspective - Tiananmen Square*, gelatin silver print, 1995-2003, Museum of Modern Art, New York (© Ai Weiwei 2017).

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