

Beijing, China’s last imperial city, once praised by Liang Sicheng as an “unparalleled masterpiece of city planning,” has nearly vanished. The city and almost all that erstwhile determined its character has been swallowed up by the virtual omnipresence of large and extra-large structures, designed as free standing ‘landmarks’ that randomly spring up all around the city. Whereas ancient Chinese ‘city builders’ like China’s ancient society did NOT place much emphasis on the individual, on the creation of single monuments but rather on the building group and the relation of all structures with one another, their contemporaries long seem to have forgotten past wisdoms and solely focus on the creation of individual BEAUTY. Due to the size of the structures, the negation of the urban setting, the solitary character and the trans-national intellectual origin of its buildings Beijing seems to have lost its identity as a Chinese city.

Post-Mao modernization has no doubt delivered material benefits to most of China’s city dwellers. However, despite being freed from the burden of MAOIST MANIA the rage against their culture did not come to a halt in 1976, the year Chairman Mao died and the Cultural Revolution officially ended. While under Mao Zedong Chinese angrily attempted to destroy their 5000 year old cultural heritage and to wipe out memories of past elitist structures in order to make room for an egalitarian society, under Deng Xiaoping, who unleashed the ghosts of market forces and opened the door for global capitalism, the Chinese, in the pursuit of personal profit, participated happily.

Today, as China re-enters the international stage and is claiming a position as a world leader, the hole torn by communist chaos and capitalist conquest is painfully felt by many Chinese. The 2008 Beijing Olympics present an opportunity to not only portray China as a reliable global partner who is willing to tackle social and environmental problems but also to come to terms with its own past. Whereas the OLYMPIC GREEN, equipped with breathtaking world-class sports facilities designed by international architectural celebrities is intended to demonstrate the bright future ahead, an AXIS spanning from the new Olympic centre to the core area of the ancient capital, the Forbidden City, is destined to symbolize the newly awakened cultural spirit calling for reconciliation with the past. This article tries to ascertain whether or not this ambitious undertaking has been successful; whether or not the extension of the IMPERIAL CENTRAL AXIS to the north, to the OLMPIC GREEN has effectively conjoined past and present or even further undermined the intellectual foundation of the city.

SECULARIZATION OF THE DIVINE

Beijing was designed in accordance with the IDEAL CITY depicted in the Kao Gong Ji, a part of the ancient ritual texts of the Zhou Li. „Here, where Heaven and Earth are in perfect accord, where the four seasons come together, where the winds and the rain gathers, where the forces of yin and yang are harmonized, one builds a royal capital.“ 1

Beijing was more than just an ordinary city selected to serve as the seat of the imperial government. To the ancient Chinese the capital functioned as the moral and spiritual centre of the entire country, as a cosmic focal point where the 'Son of Heaven' mediated between earthly and heavenly realms. It was seen as the physical manifestation of a harmonic world order. Due to its divine nature, Chinese leaders throughout the ages paid special attention to the design of their capital. Even the slightest change to the configuration of the imperial city had to be regarded as an affront to tradition and thus to the established world order. Contravention could undermine imperial power, could even result in the loss of the heavenly mandate executed by the emperor.

Apart from the checkerboard structure and the central location of the imperial palace the most prominent feature of the ancient capital was the WALL. Oswald Siren once proclaimed: „The walls are the most permanent part of a Chinese city. To the Chinese, there is no such thing as a city without a wall. It is just as inconceivable as a house without a roof.“2 As the country was bounded by the Great Wall in the North to fend off nomadic tribes, the city, the market, the palace and every ordinary house was wrapped in walls to not only defend their inhabitants against natural calamity or military attack but also to repel demonic spirits. „For the ancient Chinese in a ritualised society, the line between the divine (or demonic) and the human indeed was not sharply drawn.“ 3

„As the capital of a feudal society, Beijing based its morphology on a patriarchal caste-like social system and expressed a strong sense of hierarchy, which extended from the grandest to the humblest buildings.“ 4 This hierarchical system was best represented by a CENTRAL AXIS running from south to north structuring the entire city, functioning as its backbone. Liang Sicheng, by many referred to as the father of Chinese architecture, once said, "Beijing's unique and magnificent structural order has been created through this central axis." Buildings of primary importance were placed in a hierarchical order on this 7.9 km long axis starting at Yongding Gate in the south, passing nine gates, culminating in the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the ritual centre of the empire and terminating at the Drum and Bell Tower.

As Mao Zedong in 1949 proclaimed Beijing the capital of his new socialist empire, he, in order to demonstrate his will to establish a secular order, attempted to break the divine structure of the city. In contrast to a proposal worked out by Liang Sicheng

and Chen Zhanxiang in the 1950s, to install the new administrative centre of the People's Republic as a 'Ville Nouvelle' to the west of the Old City and thus leave this "final crystallization (...) of [imperial] city planning"⁵ intact, it was decided to place the governmental centre right inside the ancient core in close proximity to the imperial palace. As many critics pointed out, this decision already in itself irrevocably destroyed the urban essence of Beijing. On top of this, true to Mao's slogan to 'convert consumer cities into producing cities,' Beijing was not only to become the political and cultural centre of the young nation but also to function as a centre of production – thus a centre of light and heavy industry. Largely incompatible with local ecological conditions the installation of large scale heavy industry has caused severe environmental degradation and consequently virtually annihilated the once praised perfect accord of 'Heaven and Earth' characteristic for this place.

In order to provide adequate infrastructure for all those new features of a modern industrial city the city walls, once deemed an indispensable part of the Chinese city, were razed to the ground and replaced by a ring road and a tube line below. The area in front of the Tiananmen, in imperial times a narrow walled square virtually blocking any inner city through traffic from east to west, was opened and enlarged to form a massive esplanade. In order to ensure proper east-west transport connections a 40km long an up to 120m wide track of land was opened.

However, the construction of this new East-West-Axis, the Chang'an Jie, was not only an act of functional necessity but also clearly politically motivated. The installation of an extra large axis perpendicular to the existing north-south axis aimed to depriving the imperial one of its primary importance. In contrast to the central axis, where major objects were hierarchically placed on the axis, thus formulating a three dimensional sequence of space, the buildings of the new East-West-Axis were arranged in an egalitarian way, side-by-side along the axis.

In addition to this the central axis was further amputated. In 1957 the southern most gate, the Yongding Gate was demolished due to claims that it obstructed transportation and was dangerous. As in 1958 the Peoples Republic of China prepared for the celebration of its 10th anniversary the "Monument to the People's Heroes," an obelisk to commemorate the martyrs who laid down their lives for the revolutionary struggles during the 19th and 20th centuries, was placed directly opposite Tiananmen on the imperial axis. Whereas all objects on the central axis were traditionally directed southwards, the inscription of this monument had an unconventional northern orientation, facing the portrait of Chairman Mao on Tiananmen Gate. Wu Hung concluded: "the new scheme signified an intention to group all architectural elements in the Square into a self-contained unit independent from the rest of Beijing (...) the Square became the meeting point of the four directions and thus the heart of the capital and the whole country."⁶ The Forbidden City as the centre was replaced by the People's Square, the FEUDAL PAST replaced by a SOCIALIST FUTURE.

Despite the fact that during the three decades of Mao's reign the divine spine was literally broken little actually changed physically in the city. Nevertheless, the changes applied to the ideological structure of the city lay the foundation for large-scale demolition and reconstruction occurring in the past two decades.

COMMODIFICATION OF HISTORY

As with many of Mao Zedong's actions: the intent was good – but the long-term implications often disastrous. After the city today has virtually been stripped bare of its cultural heritage it is an overwhelming task to revive any kind of link with the past, reequip Beijing with a distinguishable face and bring order to the urban wild growth. The preparation for the Olympic Games provided Beijing with the opportunity to tackle these problems and unearth the Chinese character of the city. Having learned the lesson of the 1980s and 90s when then-mayor Chen Xitong eagerly propagated the revival of the architecture of the so called "national form" in order to fill the aesthetic void created by Maoist rationalism but leaving behind nothing else but an infamous collection of shiny high-rise structures crowned with disproportionate pagoda roofs, planners today aim deeper than mere carnival-like façade decorations in order to excavate the cultural spirit of the city. The site selected to host the 2008 Olympics is located north of the Forbidden City – in direct extension of the imperial central north-south axis: a chance to conjoin past and presence and heal wounds?

Already in 1954 the Beijing Urban Master Planning extended the central axis northward to the area now called the Olympic Green. According to the 1983 Beijing Urban Construction Master Planning the site was reserved to facilitate important sports, leisure and cultural functions in the future. As China hosted the 1990 Asian Games parts of the area were already used to install sports venues.⁷ Today the time has come to develop the area into a world class sports- and leisure centre.

Selecting a site reserved for so many decades for a special event like the Olympics most certainly is a wise step especially given that the existing facilities of the Asian Games could be utilized. Since this piece of land was not fully developed and build-up and therefore not as densely populated as the rest of Beijing, "there was no need for major relocation of residents"⁸ as the chief planner of the Beijing Urban Planning & Design Institute Du Liqun pointed out. In a country undergoing an urban revolution as dramatic as the contemporary Chinese one, it might be true that 10,355 people having to be relocated from the Olympic Green itself – a figure stated by the official website of the Beijing Olympics - might indeed not qualify to be called an act of 'major relocation.' However, in the pursuit of turning Beijing into a 'world-class metropolis' suitable to stage the 'best Olympic Games ever,' modernizing the entire infrastructure of the city, setting up new core areas and breaking a massive axis from the Forbidden City all the way up north to the Olympic Green, it is estimated by the Geneva-based Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions "that a total

of 1.5 million people will be displaced from their homes by the time the Games commence in August 2008.” 9

Given the magnitude of disruption of the social fabric of the city some critics dwell upon the parallels Beijing’s contemporary development has with 19th century Haussmann reconstruction of Paris under Napoleon III. Commissioning a proposal for remodelling its north-south axis to Albert Speer Junior in 2002/03 fuelled the discussion about the ambitions behind this undertaking. Despite the fact that some critics downright crucified Speer for picking up this commission, decrying he wanted to outdo his father who, as generally known, designed the central axis for Hitler’s world capital Germania, the question of whether or not the northward extension of the central axis of Beijing would be of any benefit to the city’s spiritual foundation or actually further destroy it was pretty much lost.

Mao broke the spirit of this city, expelling all deities and demons. His successors today try in vain to reanimate its Chinese soul. They not only ordered a thorough brush-up of the Forbidden City to restore past imperial glories bright enough to outshine Mao’s grey secular centre of Tiananmen Square, but also a full reconstruction of the once destroyed Yongding Gate, the starting point of the axis, thus completing its ancient path. In addition to this, in order to bridge past and presence, they extended the central axis up to the Olympic Green, restoring its primary importance to the city. Regardless of how difficult a complete replication of an old structure such as Yongding Gate might appear to an occidental observer, all these actions clearly signal that Beijing authorities aim to come to terms with the city’s past. The broken spine is mended and stands upright once again.

However, taking a closer look this picture perfect cannot convince. The new part of the axis leading up to the Olympic Green is in many regards incompatible with the old city. In ancient times an axis did not necessarily need to be composed of a straight line. As can be vividly studied in the ancient gardens of Suzhou, an axis could change its direction without losing its original intent. The new northern extension of the axis does indeed make reference to this ancient concept – at least on its first meters. Further north, however, it abruptly turns into a gigantic vista, an extra-large open view axis standing in sharp contrast to the very idea of the Chinese axis. By these means it is difficult to celebrate the adoption of the traditional meandering structure as a truly successful attempt to conjoin past and presence.

Despite the fact that Beijing was designed on the basis of the ancient IDEAL CITY, which by definition had to feature three city gates on each side, Beijing’s northern city wall was only punctuated by two gates. In extension of the central axis there was NO GATE, just the WALL.

Since there was no gate there was no street or even lane leading up north from the Drum and Bell Tower. Designing the new axis, the planners avoided breaking the axis straight through this densely populated areas north of the Drum and Bell Tower

and selected an old lane to the west to be widened to formulate a grand axis. Not the fact that numerous traditional courtyard houses along Jiu Gulou Dajie had to be sacrificed in order to satisfy the officials' hunger for 'SUPER SIZE', but more so the act of 'breaking through the city wall' needs to be questioned. In the old days the axis was protected in the north by a wall, symbolically shielding off all evil attempting to invade the city from the north. Despite nothing more than names remained of most of the city wall and its gates, it cannot strike us as an act of appeasement to virtually break down the wall a second time.

The incompatibility of this new axis with the existing city becomes even clearer once we try to READ the axis in a traditional manner. As pointed out above, the imperial axis could be understood as a hierarchical procession from south to north, culminating in the centre of the Forbidden City. Since the axis did not terminate at the climax but went on to the Bell and Drum Tower, we cannot outright condemn a northern extension of the axis. However, the Drum and Bell Tower did not represent an additional climax outranking the imperial throne. Describing a 'downward' movement from the palace, they were understood as a far-reaching projection of imperial power into the public domain. 10 Through the sound of the drums and bells the emperor dictated to Beijing's inhabitants their daily routine, when to work and when to rest. If we would now read the new northern axis – in the same manner as the part from the Forbidden City to the Drum and Bell Tower – thus as a 'downward' movement – we would have to conclude that the Olympic Green, located so far away from the centre, would be a place of no essential importance to the city. However, we all know that this would not be in tune with the ambitious ideas of Beijing authorities.

On the other hand, if we read the axis in its original direction, as a hierarchical procession from south to north, we would need to conclude, that neither the Forbidden City nor the People's Square (with the adjacent government institutions) would formulate the climax but would be reduced to mediocrity. It is hard to imagine that this would be in the government's intent. Since we cannot read the axis in any traditional Chinese way, we have to conclude that this new axis by no means brings out the Chinese character of the place. On the contrary, by extending the central axis up north, the traditional concept of the existing axis is weakened. By adding an additional climax north of the Forbidden City and connecting these two points with an axis – so similar in its basic appearance to the central axis - the original concept of space is further destroyed.

By these means it has to be considered a contradiction in itself to strengthen the ancient axis through the reconstructing of its start point and at the same time depriving it of its very nature. The reconstruction and refurbishment of traditional elements along the axis is thus not intended to revive the Chinese spirit, but to solely create picturesque tourist attractions with no connection to their original intent.

Since the NEW SUPER AXIS, stretching all the way from Yongding Gate to the Olympic Green in most parts constitutes a NON-CHINESE AXIS, the lengthy discussions whether or not to design a 120-story super size high-rise structure as an entrance gate to the Olympic Green in the traditional manner directly on the axis - in order to strengthen the "Chinese character" of the structure - can be pretty much omitted at this point. Given the magnitude of destruction already caused by the introduction of the new axis, a new gate-building or two, regardless of their size, would not really have made much of a difference.

HEAD OR TAIL

Finally a highly symbolic icon destined to be placed on the very northern end of the new central axis inside the Olympic Green has to be examined: a lake in the shape of a DRAGON. For in ancient times Beijing's central axis peaked at the throne of the emperor, who was represented by the symbol of the DRAGON, the central axis was called DRAGON PULSE. Consequently in contemporary commercial China it comes at no surprise that in order to remind the visitor most vividly that this is not Boston, Berlin or Brasilia but Beijing the new axis has to make some kind of reference to the DRAGON.

In the name of cultural reconciliation elements of imperial times are reanimated. However, since Beijing is not a theme park, where cultural symbols can be playfully jumbled up, but an ancient city with existent cultural layers, the integration of such reanimated symbols is often destructive to the original. Placing a giant DRAGON on the axis north of the imperial throne has to be considered either ironic, insensitive or even vengeful. Since Beijing earnestly strikes for international recognition and wants to be acknowledged as the centre of this great ancient culture we most certainly can omit the first.

Taking a closer look at this new dragon, things become even more confusing. In ancient times the emperor, and thus the DRAGON faced SOUTH. Not only the palace or the temples but all important rooms of every ordinary house faced SOUTH. Wang Zi, a scholar from Song dynasty once proclaimed: „Houses and graves faced the south because the annual animation of the vegetable kingdom with the approach of summer comes from the quarter, the deadly influence of winter from the north.“¹¹ Consequently an old Beijing saying goes: "No wealthy people would ever live in rooms facing north or west." The fondness of the southern orientation can still be felt in the layout of every modern residential compound. The new DRAGON – however – is designed in a different manner. Not the DRAGON'S FACE but the DRAGON'S TAIL faces SOUTH. This indeed is ironic.

NECROLOGY

In many regards the changes applied to the configuration of the central axis of Beijing is symptomatic for the overall urban development of contemporary China. As outlined in this article the 2008 Olympics – despite being propelled by the slogan “New Beijing - Great Olympics” – do NOT mark the beginning of a new bright future for Beijing but rather the tragic endpoint of a development starting in 1949. Whereas Mao’s destruction of Chinese culture was clearly politically motivated in order to make room for a new and better society, supposedly free of hierarchy and inequality, today, deprived of former idealism, ancient Chinese culture in the name of commercial benefit is reduced to an empty shell - easy to sell. After years of capitalist wild growth the struggle for identity has become omnipresent. Chinese aim to revive the virtues of their ancient culture. However, since Chinese culture is far too complex to suit the demands of modern mass media, and thus is too difficult to be easily consumed by the masses, it has to be reduced to its most superficial parts only. However rich Chinese culture is in symbolism, you cannot simply reduced it to a mere symbol of itself. The DRAGON now formulating the northern end of the CENTRAL AXIS has to be understood as the final capitulation of Chinese culture in the face of commerce. Striking to reanimate the body, Beijing was deprived of its soul.

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- ¹ “Zhou Li” in Laquian, A.A.: Preface to Wu Liangyong, Rehabilitating the Old City of Beijing: A Project in the Ju’er Hutong Neighbourhood, 1st ed., Vancouver, 1999, p.xi.
 - ² Oswald Siren, The Walls and gates of Peking, 1924, in Pennypacker, Eliza: Northern Chinese space: Tradition in transition?, Ekistics 333, Nov/Dec.1988, p.337.
 - ³ Xu Yinong: The Chinese City in Space and Time, 1.Aufl., University of Hawaii, 2000, p.46.
 - ⁴ Wu Liangyong: Rehabilitating the Old City of Beijing - A Project in the Ju’er Hutong Neighbourhood, 1st ed., Vancouver, 1999, p.13.
 - ⁵ Wu Liangyong: A Brief History of Ancient Chinese City Planning, Sonderband URBS ET REGIO 38/1986, p.80.
 - ⁶ see <http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/pubs/reviews/visser2.htm>
 - ⁷ see Briefing on the relocation project for Olympic venues, The Official Website of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, <http://en.beijing2008.cn/news/official/preparation/n214253222.shtml>
 - ⁸ see “The New Glory of An Ancient City,” Beijing This Month, December 2007, <http://www.btmbeijing.com/contents/en/btm/2007-12/2008/Article.2007-12-01.0767351921>
 - ⁹ see http://www.cohre.org/view_page.php?page_id=278
 - ¹⁰ see: Robin Visser: book review of Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space by Wu Hung. See: <http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/pubs/reviews/visser2.htm>
 - ¹¹ see Liu, Laurence G.: Chinese Architecture, 1st ed., London, 1989, p.29.