



China Perspectives

2008/4 | 2008

The City, Laboratory of the New China

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Fewer Walls, More Malls in Beijing, Shanghai and Xining

Piper Gaubatz



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4743>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.4743

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2008

Number of pages: 72-83

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Piper Gaubatz, « New Public Space in Urban China », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2008/4 | 2008, Online since 01 December 2011, connection on 28 October 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4743> ; DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.4743

New Public Space in Urban China

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PIPER GAUBATZ

China's post-reform modernisation and hyper-urbanisation have brought new public spaces to Chinese cities. This article examines the development of a public sphere and five types of new public spaces: newly-open landscapes, squares, commercial spaces, "green" spaces, and transitional spaces. Specific examples are drawn from Beijing, Shanghai, and Xining.

Two weeks before the start of the 2008 Olympics, the city of Beijing was alive with the sights and sounds of construction as projects ranging from pocket parks to Olympic venues were completed. At the main venue north of the Forbidden City, domestic and foreign tourists crowded to take photographs and watch the project through a chain-link fence. Just south of the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square, small groups of people peered through small gaps in a high metal fence screening another major project – the rebuilding of the busy Dazhulan market district into a Disney-esque 1920s streetscape, complete with streetcars and costumed shop assistants.

Two thousand kilometres to the west, in Xining, capital of Qinghai Province, children posed for pictures in front of a large display featuring the five Olympic mascots at the edge of a large, multi-functional public square. Just around the corner, one of Xining's three Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants overflowed with customers. Although these four small performances of everyday life might seem mundane, taken together, they are symbolic of the new ways in which public space is being [re]created in Chinese cities today.

This article will focus on five processes/types of new urban public space in China: (1) the opening of new or redeveloped spaces to the public through the removal of walls and other barriers; (2) the changing form and function of open squares and plazas in Chinese cities; (3) the commercialisation of public space in retail centres, (4) the emergence of new activities and spaces in parks and art and entertainment venues, and (5) the ephemeral spaces and activities that have become characteristic of transitional China. Examples will be drawn especially from Beijing and Shanghai as cities located on the leading edge of China's new encounters with

globalisation and modernity, and Xining, a provincial capital experiencing the echoes of those encounters. But the discussion must begin with a brief overview of the evolving concept of public, and public space, in China.

The evolving concept of Chinese public space

Public space in the modern city is charged with meaning and with controversy.⁽¹⁾

The concepts of the "public sphere" and "public space" have long been explored and contested vis-à-vis cities in Europe and America. As Peter Goheen has observed, there have been two "contrasting assessments of the significance of public space to the conduct of public life in the modern city": that which celebrates public space as the locus for the dynamism of the public sphere, and that which laments the devaluation of public space under capitalism.⁽²⁾ Differing aspects of China's emerging public space validate both of these oppositional stances.

Sociologist Jürgen Habermas invigorated the contemporary debate on the constitution of the public sphere⁽³⁾ with his

1. Peter G. Goheen, "Public Space and the Geography of the Modern City," *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1998, p. 479.
2. Peter G. Goheen, *op. cit.*, pp. 479-480. Here Goheen uses two contrasting works as symbolic of these differing viewpoints: Sharon Zukin (*The Cultures of Cities*, Cambridge, MA, Blackwell, 1995) for the celebratory viewpoint, and Richard Sennett (*The Fall of Public Man*, New York, Norton, 1992) for the lament.
3. Originally published as *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962). This work was translated and published in English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989 and became influential in the English language literature only after that time. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1989.

Passers-by peering through the fence at the re-construction of Qianmen Street, Beijing, into a pedestrian street in 1920s style. An image of the completed street is painted on the metal fencing.

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contention that the “public sphere” arises in tandem with the nascent modernity of the late eighteenth century. That a “public sphere” develops in conjunction with the onset of modernity is consistent with the Chinese experience. The transformations inherent in nascent modernity may have arrived during the mid- to late-nineteenth century in Chinese cities with the development of rail transportation and the introduction of “modern” modes of production.⁽⁴⁾ The 1980s saw the rise of a new “cultural public space” that Philip C.C. Huang has described as “a space intermediate between state and society in which both participated.”⁽⁵⁾ This is an “an intellectual space comprising (1) state generated public space, (2) society-originated, officially-backed public space, (3) societal public space and (4) dissident public space.”⁽⁶⁾ The opening of a public sphere and related intellectual and cultural public space provides a social context for the physical development of “public spaces.” Indeed, it is the existence of a public sphere that enables the “public” aspect of urban space – the spaces where the public sphere can be built, experienced, and performed.

Arguably, it is only in the twentieth century, and perhaps only recently, that there has been a profusion of different types of public and quasi-public spaces within Chinese cities. As Dieter Hassenpflug observes, “...the idea of civil public space is something very new in China.”⁽⁷⁾ And only in the most recent era have these spaces become open to a wide range of spontaneous and unprogrammed activities. Both a rising modernity, with its evolving structure of power and technologies, and rising post-modernity, with its fluid and tractable associations, have been influential in shaping Chinese urban space over the past 30 years.

Contemporary Chinese analysts have used a number of different schemes for identifying and categorising public space in urban China today. A recent analysis of residents’ perceptions of urban public space in a newly-developed district of the city of Tianjin by researchers from Beijing University, the Shanghai Urban Planning and Design Institute, and the Tianjin Economic and Technological Development Area identified eight types of urban public space: commercial retail space, service space, local markets, auditoriums/performance space, recreational space, clubhouses, formal urban public space (landscaped plazas, etc.), and parks,⁽⁸⁾ while authors analysing new urban spaces in Shanghai emphasise spaces created through flood protection systems, the construction of urban squares, the development of shopping streets, and the creation of new landscape elements.⁽⁹⁾ Another analysis emphasises public squares, parks, and open space,⁽¹⁰⁾ a fourth focuses on green space, pedestrian

streets, and public squares,⁽¹¹⁾ while yet another answers the question “what is urban public space?” with two emphases: meeting the daily needs of local residents with streets, open squares, the outdoors spaces in housing areas, and parks and recreational facilities; and meeting the larger-scale needs of the city as a whole through the development of civic centres, commercial districts, and green spaces.⁽¹²⁾ In general the literature on Chinese urban public space seems better developed for “outdoor” spaces than for indoor spaces – from gymnasiums to shopping malls. Yet these interior spaces – particularly the new spaces of capitalism – have drawn much attention in analyses of western cities in recent years.

1. Jianhong Dong, *Zhongguo Chengshi Jianshe Shi* (History of Chinese urban development), Beijing, China Building Industry Press, 2004, p. 323.
2. Philip C.C. Huang, “Public sphere and ‘civil society’ in China? The Third Realm between State and Society,” *Modern China*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1993, pp. 216-240.
3. Edward X. Gu, “Cultural Intellectuals and the Politics of Cultural Public Space in Communist China (1979-1989): A Case Study of Three Intellectual Groups,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 58, no. 2, 1999, pp. 389-431.
4. Dieter Hassenpflug, “The Rise of Public Urban Space in China,” paper presented at the City Futures Conference, Chicago, IL, 8-10 July 2004.
5. Tao Long, Yan-wei Chai, Jun Xin, and Mei Ma, “Xinlei Chengshihua Diqu Zhumin Chengshi Gonggong Kongjian Renzhi yu Liyong Yanjiu” (Resident’s perceptions and use of urban public space in a new type of urban area), *Renwen Dili* Vol. 23, No. 4, 2008, pp. 17-22.
6. Lin Liu and Wenjin Zhi, “Shanghai Xin Chengshi Kongjian” (Shanghai’s new urban space), *Xiandai Chengshi Yanjiu*, No. 8, 2005, pp. 58-63.
7. Mingjuang Lu, “Renxinghua Chengshi Gonggongkongjian de Sheji Yanjiu” (Research on the design of humanistic urban public space), *Gongye Jianzhu*, No. 36, 2006, pp. 14-16.
8. Bin Xu and Qinfang Gu, “Xiantan Zhongguo dangdai chengshi gonggong kongjian sheji linian de yanbian” (The evolution of design concepts for urban public space in contemporary China), *Shanxi Jianzhu*, Vol. 34, No. 23, 2008, pp. 45-46.
9. Kun Wu, “Chengshi Gonggong Kongjian jiqi Renxinghua Sheji de Sikao” (Urban public space and thinking about humane design), *Zhongguo Shichang*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 92-93.

Urban public space in pre-1949 China

What constituted “public space” in the pre-modern Chinese city? In Japan, while Japanese urban tradition lacks a precise equivalent to the Greek *agora* – the quintessential classical urban public space – a somewhat similar function was played by shrines, the grounds of which represented the most expansive semi-public spaces in the cities. These multifunctional spaces were used not only for religious purposes, but also to some degree as spaces for social gathering and children’s play. However, the role of shrines as community gathering places has declined in the latter half of the twentieth century.⁽¹³⁾ Chinese temples served a similar function, as they often represented the largest “open spaces” the public could enter, and they hosted periodic events such as temple fairs and religious festivals that afforded opportunities for participation in Chinese public life. But even more than in Japan, traditional Chinese urban space was long rigorously defined and partitioned. The high walls that surrounded and organised the space of China’s traditional cities precluded the existence of true public spaces. These walls created solid, nested spaces – from the massive walls that surrounded entire cities, to those that surrounded wards, or districts, and those that enclosed courtyard houses within those districts. Histories suggest that in the early incarnations of Chinese urban form, nearly every kind of urban activity took place inside the walled wards and markets of the city, and street-life was virtually non-existent. Even when Chinese cities became more commercialised, from the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD) onward, and emerging street markets defied the strict enclosure of city walls, the markets themselves were often controlled by guilds and native-place associations.⁽¹⁴⁾ Yet perhaps even under these conditions there existed a vibrant public life within the cities. This would have revolved around the “temple fairs” (periodic market gatherings that also incorporated entertainments), urban teahouses, and markets; and in larger towns and cities, around the theatres where Chinese opera and other traditional entertainments were performed. Nonetheless, aside from agricultural lands, large outdoor urban spaces were largely cut off from the use and even the sight of most Chinese people. The spectacular landscaped gardens of China’s eastern cities, for example, were the private, walled domains of the elite. Even with the initial introduction of modern spaces that accompanied the expansion of foreign “treaty ports” in nineteenth century China’s eastern coastal cities, public parks were walled and gated. Thus walls served as the defining physical feature of traditional Chinese cities. As David Strand remarked, for example:

...early twentieth century Beijing, as a physical entity, remained a city stubbornly defined by walls, walled enclosures, and gates. The fifteenth-century Ming plan of the capital decreed boxes within boxes and cities within cities. The habits of vernacular architecture extended this principle into neighborhoods and residences.⁽¹⁵⁾

While it is true that many cities, particularly those transformed as Treaty Ports between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, had pulled down some of their walls in the early twentieth century to make way for traffic improvements, and that cities in the south had fewer massive walls than cities in the north, the walled-in character of Chinese cities remained. Family life was hidden behind walled courtyards, and public structures were enclosed within high walls. Walls transcended class: the powerful classes lived within sometimes massive walled complexes, while the slums comprised mazes of walled-in hovels.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, social, economic, and political modernities developed in China and spurred the development of the public sphere. During this period, semi-private spaces such as guild meeting halls, and public spaces such as opera halls, were often used for political speeches and rallies, thus taking on a quality of public space.⁽¹⁶⁾

Urban public space in Revolutionary China

With the 1949 revolution came a new vision of a public sphere predicated on socialism’s participatory ideals. The massive changes wrought by the Socialist revolution and urban planning after 1949 included the construction of wider roads, open spaces, and public places in cities that had been largely mazes of closed space in earlier years. In some cases, Soviet advisors worked together with Chinese planners to produce plans not unlike their Soviet counterparts: grand public monuments, large public squares, and

13. Koji Ohnishi, “Gifukun hashimashi ni okeru kodomo no seikatsukuukan no seditaiken henka” (Children’s life space changes over three generations: A case study in Hashima City, Gifu), *Geographical Review of Japan*, 71A-9, 1998, pp. 679-701.
14. Kao, Yung-cheng, *The Unit-of-Place in the Planning of Chinese cities*, Master’s Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1981, p. 55.
15. Strand, David, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989, p. 1.
16. Richard Belsky, “The urban ecology of late imperial Beijing reconsidered: The transformation of social space in China’s late imperial capital city,” *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2000, p. 70; Di Wang, “Street culture: Public space and urban commoners in late-Qing Chengdu,” *Modern China*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1998, pp. 34-72.

new city centres dominated the monumental landscape, while residential areas were formed on the low-density Soviet “superblock” principle (Alfred Schinz notes that after the Soviet advisors had left, Chinese planners tended to fill the wide open spaces within the superblocks with additional structures⁽¹⁷⁾). Yet, to a large extent, even these changes failed to transform the walled-in nature of Chinese cities. In some ways public space was even more restrictive in the new China than it had been during the imperial era. Walls were retained when other aspects of traditional society were discarded in the aftermath of the Chinese revolution.

New urban development – whether factories and housing to fuel China’s industrialisation or building complexes to support new bureaucracies – was inevitably walled and gated. Most newly-constructed public institutions and production facilities were sited within compounds behind high walls or fences. Public parks were often walled, with limited access and gates locked in the evening. Cities grew as accretions of these walled and gated cells,⁽¹⁸⁾ and with many of these walled complexes containing not only spaces of work but also residential, educational, recreational, and social service spaces, public life retreated, to a large extent, to the confines of the home compound. Moreover, the commercial and entertainment sectors within cities were sharply curtailed, further limiting the public life of urban residents.

Urban public space in post-reform China

The reform era (1978+) brought a new vision for Chinese cities: one that increasingly required the redevelopment of urban space toward international standards and models, and toward the accommodation of rapidly increasing economic activities and populations.⁽¹⁹⁾ New forms of urban public space emerged during this time period. Bin Xu and Qinfang Gu have identified three different phases in the design of public space in urban China since 1978. During phase one (1978-1991), with the introduction of market reforms, the relatively limited pre-reform emphasis on large public squares was replaced with a new emphasis on landscaping and on fulfilling basic needs for redevelopment space. During the second phase, 1992-1999, they argue, the impacts of globalisation were felt, with an emphasis on western styles, including the construction of new urban plazas and western-style pedestrian streets as fulfilment of sensory needs. Since 2000, the third phase has seen an emphasis on environment and urban “green” spaces and a more varied approach that emphasises a wide range of both short-term and long-range needs.⁽²⁰⁾ The remainder of this article will

focus primarily on the reform era and its consequences for new urban public space.

Walls: Sublimating boundaries

To “sublimate” is to transform the expression of a desire or impulse from an unacceptable form to a more socially or culturally acceptable form. The reform era has brought a gradual sublimation of the bounded qualities of traditional and Maoist urban space. While the boundaries once defined by high, opaque walls in Chinese cities still exist, their physical form is more subtle as the walls themselves are torn down and replaced by open fences and electronic security. In this manner the physical landscapes of Chinese cities have become more open – more public – yet the distinctions between what is public and what is private remain relatively unchanged.

The walled-in nature of Chinese cities has eroded more significantly in the past 20 years than in the previous 2,000. New architectural styles influenced by international design have transformed the face of many Chinese cities to a more open landscape. Commercial structures in particular are now more often found in an unwalled, landscaped site rather than a walled compound. Those new structures that do maintain a wall for security purposes are today more likely to erect a metal fence that provides security without interfering with the visual line of the site plan.⁽²¹⁾

The transformation of Beijing’s Friendship Hotel (*Youyi binguan*) during the late 1990s illustrates these changes. Long an icon of the Maoist approach to international rela-

17. Alfred Schinz, *Cities in China*, Berlin, Gebruder Borntraeger, 1989, p. 25.

18. Piper Gaubatz, “Urban Transformation in Post-Mao China: Impacts of the Reform Era on China’s Urban Form,” in D. Davis, R. Kraus, B. Naughton, and E. Perry, eds., *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China, The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press Series, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 28-60; Piper Gaubatz, “Understanding Chinese Urban Form: Contexts for Interpreting Continuity and Change,” *Built Environment*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1999, pp. 251-270; Piper Gaubatz, “China’s Urban Transformation: Patterns and Processes of Morphological Change in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou,” *Urban Studies* vol. 36, no. 9, 1999, pp. 1495-1521; Duanfang Lu, *Remaking Chinese Urban Form*, London, Routledge, 2006, pp. 49-67.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Bin Xu and Qinfang Gu, “Xiantan Zhongguo dangdai chengshi gonggong kongjian sheji linian de yanbian,” *op. cit.*

21. Housing is still commonly found behind walls and gates, with a trend toward the construction of “gated” communities in recent years. In regard to debates over the “public” and “private” spheres, some have contended that the private “gated” communities (as opposed to the walled communities of workers overseen by their own management) that are becoming increasingly prevalent in China’s cities may allow great personal freedoms, as they shield citizens from the surveillance of both workplaces and state-controlled spaces (see Choon-Piew Pow, “Constructing a new private order: Gated communities and the privatization of urban life in post-reform Shanghai,” *Social and Cultural Geography*, vol. 8, No. 6, 2007, pp. 813-833).

tions, the Friendship Hotel had, since its construction in 1954, served as an exclusive enclave for foreign “experts” resident in Beijing. The compound was surrounded by high walls and guarded by uniformed guards and imposing gates. During the mid 1980s, the Friendship Hotel housed foreigners and many of their offices in a secure compound that provided “foreign” amenities such as a bakery, a grocery shop, foreign currency exchange, and taxi services to its residents and other foreign residents of the city’s university district. Local residents watched with curiosity as foreigners entered the exclusive bounds of the compound into the unknown precincts within the high walls. A decade later, the walls were removed. In their place there is now a six-metre wide strip of low stone planters planted with juniper bushes and other perennials. The security booths are small, more symbolic than functional, and the whole of the compound’s main building is easily in view. In 2002, the grounds and structures were further renovated to create a more open landscape. The clientele have changed as well – from foreign experts to local and overseas Chinese business travellers and tourists. Yet the walls are still present in the form of security guards; those without business on the grounds would certainly be escorted to the street in no uncertain terms.

Similarly, Shanghai’s “People’s Park” (*Renmin gongyuan*), which was walled and required a small entrance fee until the early 1990s, has since been replaced by open landscaping and new monumental structures. People’s Park stands on the site of a race track built for horse-racing by the European residents of Shanghai during the Treaty Port era (1842-1949). After 1949, the site was redeveloped as Shanghai’s public square for holding mass rallies and a public park. Its most recent transformation has not only replaced the paved square with landscaped gardens and monumental structures (the Shanghai Museum, the Shanghai Grand Theatre, the Shanghai Urban Planning Exhibition Centre), but has also involved dismantling the gated public park in favour of more open and varied landscaping. Not only have the walls been dismantled, but the site itself has come to serve as the western anchor for the redevelopment of Shanghai’s premier shopping street – Nanjing Road – into a pedestrian mall.

In recent years, the government of Shanghai has charged its urban planners with reducing the quantity of walls throughout the city.⁽²²⁾ This is only one example of countless official efforts to dismantle walls in Chinese cities. Ironically, the ideological imperatives for the breakdown of the symbols of the hegemony of traditional China, such as the dismantling of walls and gates in Beijing, both to make room

for the construction of Tiananmen Square and to symbolically close an era, did not result in the dismantling of all traditional walls in China, nor did they preclude the construction of new walls. In cities such as Xining, in fact, many city walls were hidden behind new structures rather than dismantled.⁽²³⁾ It is only in the reform era that efforts to open up urban space have so significantly changed the “walled” character of China’s urban public spaces.

Squares: New life for revolutionary spaces

Open plazas have been described as the “quintessential public space” of pre-twentieth century western cities.⁽²⁴⁾ In China, however, the open plaza only came to prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century. The most spectacular “new” type of public space to be introduced into the landscape of Chinese cities after 1949 was the public square. These massive urban features, modelled after Moscow’s Red Square and other Soviet examples, were meant to house the scripted mass demonstrations of revolutionary fervour that characterised Maoist China. Whereas the centres of traditional Chinese cities were, more often than not, occupied by the exclusive, walled-in courtyards of the bureaucratic or religious elites, the new squares replaced the “forbidden” centre with an open space where the common people could gather.

Tiananmen Square was the most symbolic of these new spaces; replacing the offices of bureaucrats that flanked the road leading to the gates of the “forbidden city,” the square, suitable for thousands of people to gather, stands at the heart of Beijing, and in a symbolic sense, at the heart of the People’s Republic. Like most Chinese administrative cities, Beijing’s 1949 centre was a walled-in, exclusive precinct of bureaucracy. The area now occupied by Tiananmen Square comprised the avenue leading up to the Forbidden City and the offices of officialdom that lined it. All of this was contained inside the “Qianmen,” or front gate, which still stands at the southern end of Tiananmen Square. Immediately outside (on the south) of Qianmen was Dazhalan, the bustling heart of Beijing’s commercial life. Thus Qianmen marked the strict bounds between the political and the commercial life of the city – analogous, in imperial times, to the divide between sacred and profane.

22. Dieter Hassenflug, “The Rise of Public Urban Space in China,” *op. cit.*, p. 5.

23. Piper Gaubatz, *Beyond the Great Wall*, *op. cit.*

24. Nan Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism*, Princeton Architectural Press, 1999, p. 170.

Preparations for the Olympics
at Tian'anmen Square, Beijing.
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Chairman Mao once declared that Tiananmen Square should be built “big enough to hold an assembly of one billion.”⁽²⁵⁾ The square was first hastily expanded to 54,000 square metres for a gathering of some 70,000 people marking the declaration of a new China. Between 1949 and 1959 it was gradually expanded to encompass 400,000 square metres as the old bureaus were demolished. By 1959, it was flanked by the Great Hall of the People and the Museum of Chinese History (both constructed in 1958-1959), and reached from the Monument to the People’s Heroes at its south end to Chang’an Boulevard on the north (this square held 400,000 people).⁽²⁶⁾

Most cities throughout China followed Beijing’s example, creating massive paved squares either within the existing urban fabric or at its outskirts.⁽²⁷⁾ These squares had ephemeral lives as viable public space; during official events they filled with people, but at other times, these vast paved expanses either served as circulatory space – creating pedestrian/bicycle shortcuts – or, in many cases, simply acted as a void at the centre of the city. Dieter Hassenpflug argues, for example, that the “open space” created by these squares during the Maoist era did not necessarily constitute “public space.” Rather, it served as a space of exclusion, meant for the staging of mass demonstrations.⁽²⁸⁾ In this sense, the space was more “political” than “public.” Squares became a virtual requirement of the urban vocabulary and were constructed “with great enthusiasm” during the Maoist era.⁽²⁹⁾ But the character of these open squares began to change in tandem with the evolution of China’s economic reforms during the 1980s. The squares began to serve as useable public space, especially for urban residents escaping the confines of their homes on hot summer nights. With the liberalisation of the service economy, vendors offering a wide range of services, from snacks and balloons to children’s tricycle rides, began to frequent the squares, which in turn, perhaps, drew more local residents to the squares. In Lanzhou, for example, the East Side Red Square, first constructed in 1958-59, was transformed in the early 1980s with the conversion of its southern end from stark pavement to flower gardens. Soon afterward, the square was further reduced in size with the construction of two tall buildings: the United Office Building and the Science Building. In other cities, although the square sometimes occupied symbolic positions at the centre of the old cities, they were more often placed on open land at the edge of the old city, and served as a new centre joining old development with new.

During the reform era, the function of large squares in Chinese cities has evolved, for the most part, into the locus

of recreational activities – particularly for concessions offering entertainment and/or snacks. The squares do continue to be used occasionally for public functions as well. Thus open squares that once served as the hallmark of the cities of new China are themselves undergoing a major transformation. Tiananmen Square itself was enlarged in 1977 with the construction of the Mao Mausoleum at its centre. The enlarged square accommodated both the mausoleum and room for 200,000 more citizens to gather (bringing the total to 600,000).⁽³⁰⁾ Yet this enlargement also changed the character of the square from an open plaza to a more complex space interspersing vast open areas with significant structures (the Monument to the People’s Heroes and the Mao Mausoleum). The square did retain the open space between the Monument to the People’s Heroes and Chang’an Boulevard, but by 1999, the recently renovated square had been softened to some extent with the addition of large grassy rectangles in what was once a vast expanse of pavement. For the 2008 Beijing Olympics, while the primary central space of the square remained intact opposite the Tiananmen Gate to the Forbidden City, large areas at the east and west sides of this space were temporarily converted to massive displays of topiary commemorating China and the Olympics, and grandstands were erected halfway between the Mao Mausoleum and Tiananmen.

Although the square continues to be a venue for mass gatherings, it was clearly reinterpreted for the Olympics as multi-functional space – a space not only for the staging of mass events, but also a significant display area and centrepiece of a landscaping effort that transformed nearly every district of the city. Not all Chinese cities had such squares. In Xining, Qinghai Province, for example, the largest open gathering place in the central city throughout the Maoist period was a large,

25. Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 23, 101.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

27. Piper Gaubatz, “Urban Transformation in Post-Mao China: Impacts of the Reform Era on China’s Urban Form,” *op. cit.*; Piper Gaubatz, “China’s Urban Transformation: Patterns and Processes of Morphological Change in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou,” *Urban Studies* 36(9), 1999, pp. 1495-1521; Piper Gaubatz, “Understanding Chinese Urban Form: Contexts for Interpreting Continuity and Change,” *Built Environment*, 24(4), 1999, pp. 251-270.

28. Dieter Hassenpflug, “The Rise of Public Urban Space in China,” *op. cit.*

29. Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Olympic Display and "Central Square," Xining, with the Wangfujing Department Store and the central business district in the background.

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round traffic circle that had been inserted into the centre of the old city. It was only in 2002 that the city built not one, but two public squares in the Tiananmen tradition. Just as cities in other regions were redesigning their outmoded squares into more flexible public spaces, Xining built new squares in keeping with the new form of squares elsewhere – far from vast deserts of pavement, these squares include landscaping, water features, performance spaces, public art, and recreational space (such as a “skateboard park”). “Central Square” stands just adjacent to the site of the old walled city – an area now being re-developed as a commercial centre. “Xin’ning Square,” in a more recently developed area in the city’s west, stands at the heart of a redeveloped cultural complex housing the provincial museum, provincial library, and a number of government bureaus. Both squares are well used by a wide range of local citizens. Here Xining bypassed the era of the Socialist square and moved directly to the new square, whose varied and multi-functional spaces serve more social than socialist functions.

Commercialising the public experience: The shopping mall as street

As Nan Ellin contends, “[t]he contemporary built environment offers a dwindling supply of meaningful public space and that which exists is increasingly controlled by various forms of surveillance and increasingly invested with private meanings.”⁽³¹⁾ Ellin’s contention echoes the lament over the devaluation of public space identified by Peter Goheen in recent literature on public space in western cities.⁽³²⁾ There has been considerable investment in the construction of new commercial landscapes in Chinese cities in recent years – from the construction of fully enclosed shopping mall/entertainment complexes to the reconstruction and management of street markets. As Anne-Marie Broudehoux argues:

[T]he centrality of consumption to the contemporary urban experience has resulted in the neglect of other aspects of city life in urban governance, including the role of the city as a home, a place for self- and collective-representation, and a public sphere where local politics are debated. Concerned with the creation of a ‘favourable business climate’ and pressured to maintain a positive image to attract economic development, many urban governments have adopted a host of new measures for the control and regulation of human behaviour.⁽³³⁾

The contemporary transformation of civic to consumer spaces and the subsequent loss of true “public” space is a common theme in the literature on western cities.⁽³⁴⁾ As Chinese urban space is increasingly commercialised, these issues arise for China as well. Six of the 25 largest enclosed shopping malls in the world are located in China; all were opened within the past five years.⁽³⁵⁾ As with shopping malls throughout the world, many of these commercial spaces are conceived as foci for entertainment and other “public” activities, as well as for the buying and selling of goods. But although many shoppers may perceive these spaces as public, they are highly regulated, controlled, and surveilled environments. Geographer Jon Goss refers to shopping malls as “pseudospace” and contends that a shopping centre or mall “...contrives to be a public civic place even though it is private and run for profit; it offers a place to commune and recreate, while it seeks retail dollars...”⁽³⁶⁾

In Chinese cities, there has been a rapid proliferation of shopping malls, shopping centres, and other concentrations of commercial retail activity in recent years. In Beijing, it is said, shopping venues have been “sprouting up across town like spring bamboo.”⁽³⁷⁾ How will these evolve as “public” or “pseudo-public” space? In traditional China, street markets provided a form of public space. In fact, Pu Miao argues that “[p]ublic streets are the main form of civic space in Chinese cities.”⁽³⁸⁾ If the street is a quintessential public space, how

31. Ellin, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

32. Peter G. Goheen, “Public Space and the Geography of the Modern City,” *op. cit.*, pp. 479–480.

33. Anne-Marie Broudehoux, *The Making and Selling of Post-Mao Beijing*, New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 5.

34. Susan Christopherson, “The Fortress City: Privatized Spaces, Consumer Citizenship,” pp. 409–427 in Ash Amin, ed., *Post-Fordism: A Reader*, Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA, Blackwell Publishers, 1994.

35. See data compilation at www.easternct.edu/depts/amerst/MallsWorld.htm.

36. Jon Goss, “The ‘Magic of the Mall’: An Analysis of form, function and meaning in the contemporary retail built environment,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 83, no. 1, 1993, p. 40.

37. Jeff Gibson, “Mega Mall Culture,” *Beijing City Weekend*, online edition, December 31, 2004, www.cityweekend.com.cn.

38. Pu Miao, “Deserted streets in a jammed town: The gated community in Chinese cities and its solution,” *Journal of Urban Design*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2003, p. 52.

does the management of the streetscape change the performance of everyday public life? To what extent has China's urban street life been programmed and managed in recent years? This question can be explored through two shopping districts: Beijing's Wangfujing and Shanghai's Xintiandi.

Wangfujing: A market street transformed

Wangfujing was a relatively undistinguished neighbourhood in Beijing until the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), when it became known for a number of large mansion or palace complexes built in the area. Long before its incarnation as a busy early twentieth century shopping street, the Wangfujing area became a focus for Beijing's contact with the non-Chinese world, especially after the Jesuits established the first Catholic church in China there in the mid-seventeenth century. Wangfujing, which parallels the eastern wall of the Forbidden City (China's imperial palace complex), was well located just north of the foreign "legation quarter" that was developed in Beijing after 1861. Here the early expatriate community could sample Chinese food and trade for Chinese goods. Wangfujing was transformed into a "modern" shopping street lined with fashionable shops in the early twentieth century. But Wangfujing also retained an open-air bazaar known as the "Dong An," established in 1902, which has been the most persistent "re-invented" element of the street.⁽³⁹⁾ After 1949, Wangfujing was transformed from its early twentieth century commercial hustle and bustle to a relatively quiet selection of state-run stores and bureaus. The Dong An bazaar was largely shut down, with the few remaining stalls nationalised and run as state enterprises. Even at the end of the 1980s, as the reforms began to take hold, the Dong An bazaar was a dark, cavernous space containing a haphazard collection of tables and stalls dealing in inexpensive plastic goods, shoes, and clothes.⁽⁴⁰⁾

The stalls and shops that huddled within the Dong An bazaar interior could not compete with the free markets and the flood of new shopping centres that began to transform the city's retailing. Wangfujing itself began to change. In 1991, Beijing's first McDonald's was opened on the corner of Wangfujing and Chang'an Avenue, Beijing's "100%" retail corner, a few steps away from the Dong An bazaar.⁽⁴¹⁾ In 1993 the Dong An bazaar was closed and demolished. The redevelopment of Wangfujing as a commercial centre began in 1996. The former site of the Dong An bazaar was incorporated into the construction of a massive new 120,000 square metre⁽⁴²⁾ multifunctional development: the Oriental Plaza, which incorporates a large enclosed shopping mall. The Dong An bazaar was re-invented in 1998 as "Sun Dong An Plaza" a few blocks down Wangfujing from the

site of the original Dong An bazaar. The new bazaar was designed to reproduce the atmosphere of the early twentieth century bazaar.⁽⁴³⁾ The exterior is decorated with Chinese-style tile roofs and columns; the basement level is designed as an early twentieth century "market street" with vendor's carts and traditional designs. The main interior floors, however, are modelled after a modern American-style shopping mall.

In the year 2000, the busiest (southern) end of Wangfujing was transformed into a pedestrian mall, carefully designed with street art, benches, and space for coffee stands and entertainment. High-end hotels occupy the adjacent blocks. The former site of the McDonald's restaurant was replaced with the Oriental Plaza. During the same year, "Old Beijing Street" was opened on the bottom level of the Sun Dong An Plaza. "Old Beijing Street" is a museum-style recreation of an old shopping street (perhaps Wangfujing itself) in Beijing. Its clean, climate-controlled shops offer a managed experience of Beijing's pre-revolutionary public space.

Wangfujing has not only become a model for similar developments elsewhere in China, but has also come to stand for Beijing nearly as prominently as the Forbidden City or Tiananmen Square. It is very well known in China as a premier commercial development and a model for the reform-era transformation of foreign commercial districts layered over with elements of traditional Chinese urban structure, early twentieth century internationalism, and post-1949 communalisation. Cities such as Xi'an, Lhasa, Zhengzhou, Nanjing, Luoyang, and Chengdu have all redeveloped former commercial areas in recent years using the Wangfujing approach: a blend of mixed-use commercial development and traditional iconography, and the creation of event-oriented pedestrian space supported by massive infusions of high-end foreign capital. Although Wangfujing was not necessarily the first redevelopment project to introduce any of these single measures, the combination of approaches set a compelling example.⁽⁴⁴⁾

39. Anne-Marie Broudehoux, *The making and selling of post-Mao Beijing*, *op. cit.*

40. Piper Gaubatz, "Xining's Wangfujing? Commercial Redevelopment, Globalization and Regional Inequality in Urban China," *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 49(2), 2008, pp. 1-20

41. This was not, however, McDonald's first restaurant in China. China's first McDonalds was opened in Shenzhen in 1990.

42. The Oriental Plaza stands on a 100,000 square metre site. Its floor area is about 800,000 square metres.

43. Fa Zhang, "Wangfujing buxingjie: Zhongguo chuanlei shidai de wenhua tuxiang" (Wangfujing pedestrian street: A cultural image of China during transition), *Xibei Shifandaxue Xuebao*, 43, 3: 1-6, 2006.

44. Gaubatz, "Xining's Wangfujing? Commercial Redevelopment, Globalization and Regional Inequality in Urban China," *op. cit.*

Climbing wall in the Dong An Plaza mall,
Wangfujing, Beijing.

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Wangfujing has now become the brand name of a department store chain as well. With more than a dozen branches in cities throughout China, the Wangfujing Department store group owns the Dong An Plaza and other department stores in the Wangfujing area. The groups' ownership is complex, but it is ultimately owned by a development company formed by the Beijing city government, as well as being listed on stock exchanges in Hong Kong and Shanghai. One of the most recent "Wangfujing" department stores was opened in Xining adjacent to the Central Square.

Wangfujing has become a popular destination for tourists and Beijing residents alike. While domestic and international tourists may stroll and take in the exterior spectacle, the exterior and interior spaces are used as public space by a wide range of residents. On many evenings, so many people are sitting on the floor reading books in the Wangfujing bookstore that it is hard to walk through the aisles, and the rock-climbing wall in the centre of the Dong An Plaza is a favourite spectator sport. Yet there is no doubt that the whole pedestrian street and its malls, shops, restaurants, and hotels are carefully managed for controlled consumption.

Xintiandi: A neighbourhood reborn as a shopping mall?

The massive redevelopment of the older districts of Chinese cities has been carried out in a number of different ways. During the mid-1990s, the Shanghai government designated the Tianqiao area, part of Shanghai's "French Concession" that had been developed by the French in the 1920s. The courtyard housing they constructed, called "shikumen," was arranged along narrow alleyways.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Although there would have been a lively neighbourhood atmosphere along these passageways, there was little if any "public" or open space. One section of this area (initially two large city blocks), near one of Shanghai's premier shopping districts, was chosen for an image-making mixed-use development designed to replicate the landscapes of Shanghai's Treaty Port era. Residents were relocated from over-crowded and dilapidated structures, and the area was redeveloped largely as relatively upscale shops, restaurants, and entertainment spaces designed and built by an international set of architectural and planning consultants coordinated by Hong Kong's Shui-On Group. Between 1999 and 2001, wide spaces were opened up between buildings to allow for crowd circulation, events, and outdoor dining when weather permits.⁽⁴⁶⁾ These open spaces have the look of public open space but are actually, like most shopping malls, semi-private and policed by automated surveillance and security guards.⁽⁴⁷⁾

This new shopping district is called "Xintiandi" (a new heaven and earth). Its promotional literature describes it as the "city's living room."⁽⁴⁸⁾ The shops and restaurants are upscale – including a wide range of internationally-recognisable brands such as Starbucks, Hugo Boss, Haagen Dazs, and Vidal Sassoon. The district caters to business crowds during the days; it is quiet until the busy lunch hour, then becomes more lively in the afternoon and evening as its young, upwardly-mobile customers leave work and seek entertainment. Like Wangfujing, it offers a clean, museum-quality experience of a moment in Chinese public history, updated to current consumer tastes. But unlike the residential district it replaced, it is not a multi-generational community.

Parks, green development and historic preservation: A new public discourse

"Today's play rules yesterday's imperial gardens."⁽⁴⁹⁾

The imperial gardens previously closed to all but China's most elite – Beihai Park, the grounds of the Temple of Heaven, the Summer Palace, and the Old Summer Palace

45. Shenjing He and Fulong Wu, "Property-led Redevelopment in Post-Reform China: A Case Study of Xintiandi Redevelopment Project in Shanghai" *Journal of Urban Affairs*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2005, pp. 1-23.
46. Albert Wing Tai Wai, "Place Promotion and Iconography in Shanghai's Xintiandi," *Habitat International*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2006, pp. 245-260.; Shenjing He and Fulong Wu, "Property-Led Redevelopment in Post-Reform China: A Case Study of Xintiandi Redevelopment Project in Shanghai," *op. cit.*
47. Albert Wing Tai Wai, "Place Promotion and Iconography in Shanghai's Xintiandi," *op. cit.*
48. <http://www.xintiandi.com>.
49. Hongmei Lu and Dongmei Lu, *Beijing at Play*, Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2008, p. 5

Weekend ribbon-dancing class,
Tiantan Park, Beijing.
© Piper Gaubatz, July 2008.



– were all opened to the public after the Chinese Revolution. But the new-found pleasures of entertainment in these gardens – such as ballroom dancing – were curtailed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and only began to re-emerge during the 1980s. During the reform era, the gardens have become centres for an increasing diversity of recreational activities. Although these parks have been used for traditional recreational activities such as Tai Chi for decades, it is only recently that they have attracted a wide range of activities – from traditional pursuits such as Tai Chi and bird-cage walking to new pursuits such as harmonica playing, matchmaking clubs, and ballroom dancing.

Recreation, entertainment, and play of all sorts have become popular in urban China. In *Beijing at Play*, two Beijing natives now living in California documented 38 different activities that have become popular in Beijing’s parks. The majority of Beijing’s nearly 200 public parks have free admission, and city residents can purchase monthly or annual passes to the most popular parks that require entrance fees.⁽⁵⁰⁾ This is a dramatic change for Beijing, where most public parks charged entrance fees well into the 1990s. A typical summer Saturday on the grounds of the Temple of Heaven, for example, has become a cacophony of competing activities – Chinese opera singers, marching bands, choral groups, calligraphers, magicians, card players, and dancers all rub elbows.

Many of these popular hobbies have grown in recent years beyond more traditional venues such as public parks. For example, one newspaper in Beijing reported at least 500 non-commercial ballroom dancing sites in the city in 2007⁽⁵¹⁾; sidewalks, after-hours parking lots, and urban plazas all serve as dance sites after the daytime traffic dies down. All of these new activities have a very public nature – they are meant to be performed. In this context the spectators themselves, whether casual passers-by or regulars, participate in a new form of public activity as they witness the countless performances around them. In the larger parks, activities such as ground calligraphy or opera singing can draw crowds in the hundreds.

The environmental focus of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games represented a much broader trend in China’s cities: an effort to massively increase the green space within the cities for the sake of improving environmental quality. This movement received accelerated attention in recent years through the “Green Beijing, Green Olympics” campaign to transform Beijing. Coupled with other environmental planning initiatives, such as Agenda 21, this twenty-first century trend has significantly transformed numerous cities across

China. The goals of efforts to “green” China’s cities have been twofold: to generate healthier ecosystems and to create more aesthetically- and experientially-pleasing cities.⁽⁵²⁾ In recent years the ecological imperative for urban green space has resulted in the conversion of many formerly marginal lands to useable public space. In Xining, for example, the clean-up of an urban river previously lined with clusters of marginal housing has resulted in the construction of a chain of small parks that regularly draw multi-generational crowds to sing, play games, drink tea, or jog along the paved paths that line the river.

Other new parks have been formed around historic preservation efforts, which have seen a new resurgence in recent years in Chinese cities. While there has long been growing concern both within China and overseas about the rapid loss of many of China’s remaining historic urban landscapes during the past 30 years of hyper-urbanisation,⁽⁵³⁾ there have also been numerous efforts to restore or rebuild pieces of the historic urban form even as much of it is being torn down. Where segments of city walls remain extant, for example, in many cities the surrounding area has been cleared and transformed into useable public space. Beijing has created such parks along fragments of walls, canals, and traditional city gates throughout the ancient imperial city; Xining has restored similar fragments and is rebuilding (from the ground up) a historic city gate to create a new public space. Rebuilding historic structures can cross from straightforward “preservation” to more imaginative efforts to capture Chinese consumers: in Shanghai, the area surrounding the city’s traditional Temple of the Town God has been rebuilt as an elaborate shopping centre built to look like traditional

50. Hongmei Lu and Dongmei Lu, *Beijing at Play*, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

51. Hongmei Lu and Dongmei Lu, *Beijing at Play*, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

52. Bojie Fu and Yihe Lu, “The Progress and Perspectives of Landscape Ecology in China,” *Progress in Physical Geography*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2006, pp. 232-244.

53. See, for example, Liangyong Wu, *Rehabilitating the Old City of Beijing: A Project in the Ju'er Hutong Neighborhood*, Vancouver, UBC Press, 1999; Anthony Tung, *Preserving the World’s Great Cities: The Destruction and Renewal of the Historic Metropolis*, New York, Three Rivers Press, 2001.

Chinese tourists viewing the “Bird’s Nest”
Olympic Stadium in Beijing.

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structures (though somewhat out of scale, with three-and four-story structures where two-story structures once prevailed). This type of project also generates useable, if controlled, public space.

Ephemeral public spaces in transitional China: Performance and practice of everyday life

Some of the more intriguing “new” public spaces in Chinese cities are those that are both spontaneous and ephemeral; as Chinese cities undergo massive and rapid physical changes, these spaces emerge and recede at a rapid pace. One of the most common aspects of urban change in China today is the destruction of existing structures to be replaced, eventually, by new development. Such destruction is often heralded by the spray-painting of a single Chinese character on the building’s walls: the word for “destroy.” Oftentimes buildings are dismantled largely by hand with the aid of sledge-hammers, and thus are in a state of demolition for a considerable length of time. Once demolished and cleared, these spaces then stand vacant, awaiting the beginning of new construction. Vacant lots punctuate the city and become, for a time, useable public space. On warm summer nights across China, from Shanghai to Urumqi, neighbourhood residents bring chairs, children, and pets to these spaces to escape the heat and exchange gossip deep into the night. Eventually, these spaces disappear as construction crews arrive, fence them in, and build the city anew.

In another form of transitional use, construction sites are used to house the construction workers in temporary dormitories at the periphery of the site. And in places where land is particularly at a premium, or the project is expected to take a significant length of time, the developers may also construct temporary commercial space, rather than walls, around the periphery of the site in order to generate rent even as the new structures are being built. The process of construction may also result in temporary public event space if the construction itself is visible enough to become a performance for popular consumption. Thus the construction of the skyscrapers of Shanghai’s Lujiazui District, for example, has not only been witnessed live, but has been filmed (in the case of the World Financial Centre) by National Geographic and uploaded to the Youtube website⁽⁵⁴⁾ for mass consumption (many other Chinese construction projects have made it to Youtube as well). At the same time, construction can “erase” landscapes and spaces for periods

of time, only to re-introduce them with little warning. The most spectacular example of this was Tiananmen Square in December 1998, which was completely walled from sight by high, solid metal fencing while undergoing repaving. Not only the square, but the plazas on either side, fronting the Great Hall of the People and the National Museum, and large sections of the area in front of the gate to the Forbidden City, were similarly completely walled from view. Another type of ephemeral public space – and new public activity in Chinese cities – is that of transient events. When the central site for the 2008 Beijing Olympics was constructed – a vast complex of sports venues and service facilities – the site was surrounded by a chain-link fence rather than the opaque, solid metal fencing that more typically surrounds Chinese construction sites. As construction progressed, these fences became a destination for tourists and city residents alike.

They gathered in festive crowds along the fences or on nearby pedestrian overpasses to witness the construction of these landmark buildings. Ever-present security guards were relatively tolerant of these daily incursions on the site perimeter – only shooing eager photographers away when they tried to climb the fences.

As new public spaces emerge in Chinese cities, they provide space for a wide range of public activities. In Xining, for example, a 75-metre long stretch of pavement was recently completed as part of a series of plazas in a public park still under construction. Soon after its completion, employees of a nearby restaurant – still in their uniforms – began to use it regularly for informal relay races, back and forth in teams of two, during the quiet afternoon hours between meal services. A new recreational pursuit that embodies the ephemeral qualities of public life and public space in China today is ground calligraphy. Ground calligraphy is an emerging art form designed specifically for public spaces. Calligraphers write individual Chinese characters, poetry, and other messages on sidewalks and plazas with large (one metre long) calligraphy brushes dipped in water. The calligraphy – often drawn with

54. National Geographic, “Constructing China’s Supertower,” January 24, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aEuuJZEJioc>

great skill – stays on the ground for only minutes before evaporating and clearing the pavement for a new message.

The rapid transition of China's economy has also opened up new forms of transitional or temporary entertainment space. Those re-using outmoded structures are particularly intriguing. Art galleries have flourished in China's larger cities. Many of Beijing's galleries can be found, for example, in the 798 art complex – a collection of industrial structures that have been converted into art galleries in recent years, in the former mansions of foreign consulates southeast of the Forbidden City, and in ancient courtyard housing scheduled for eventual demolition. Many of these spaces are transitional at best, as they are located in structures and locations that are likely to be used for more profitable ventures in the long run. But for the moment, taken together, they create a culture of public commentary through art – irreverent, mournful, or exotic. Here is a venue for spontaneity and creativity perhaps beyond the imaginary of the Maoist city.

In contemporary China, a constantly shifting landscape epitomises the public image of the new Chinese cities as older structures are destroyed and new ones replace them at a rapid rate. As the pace of change in Chinese cities slows down, perhaps these informal and spontaneous spaces will become less common.

Discussion: Re-inventing the public experience

Is there “more” or “less” of a public sphere and of public space in post-reform China? Naturally it is difficult, if not impossible, to answer such a question. But what can be said is that public life was enacted and experienced in quite different ways during the Maoist period than it is today. One example is found in transportation. A visitor to Guangzhou in the early 1970s noted:

In traveling from our hotel in downtown Canton [Guangzhou] to the western edge of the city, we met (on-coming) 15 cars (by actual count). Remember that Canton is a city of 2,200,000. Remember, too, that this was between 8:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. and on a workday.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Most of the traffic was on foot, on bicycles, or in buses. In this sense the public sphere – to the extent it is experienced in the city's circulation systems – in Chinese cities involved daily, direct contact with other people. Today, however, Guangzhou is jammed with vehicular traffic, and a growing

portion of the population experiences movement through the city enclosed in the climate-controlled confines of cars and other vehicles. In this facet of the coming of modernity, moving from one place to another in the city is transformed, for some, from an intensely public experience to a quasi-private experience. Yet new technologies of transportation – particularly urban rail systems – can also generate new public spaces and experiences. In China's largest, most developed cities, new, revitalised, or massively expanded urban rail systems provide new public space in their stations. Steven Lewis has identified mass transit stations as one of the new public spaces in global cities.⁽⁵⁶⁾

In a similar manner, “public” or common space in residential areas has changed. Within the “work unit” compounds of the Maoist city, there were numerous shared, and thus quasi-public, spaces. The privatisation and marketisation of housing in Chinese cities has undoubtedly meant a decrease in shared spaces within housing structures and developments. Yet the separation of housing from the workplace⁽⁵⁷⁾ has also increased the time China's urban citizens spend away from their own neighbourhoods. And they spend that time in an ever-growing number of ways, in countless venues provided and marketed from a wide range of sources – from planners' and developers' careful landscape features to the mass-marketed, signature landscapes of global commercialism.

Both the “public” and the “private” spheres are undergoing transition in twenty-first century China as social, political, cultural, and economic relations are negotiated amidst rapidly changing urban space. What constitutes public space itself is a contested and contextualised category. New public space in urban China cannot be seen simply as either a locus for the dynamism of an emerging public sphere and civil society or a space devalued by capitalism.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Rather, as the Chinese public sphere is formed and re-formed by China's continuing engagement with the world and with itself, new public spaces, practices, and performances are simultaneously generating a new dynamism and experiencing the devaluation of the public sphere under the watchful eye of the quasi-public and managed realm of commercial development. •

55. M.E. Ensminger and A. Ensminger, *China - the Impossible Dream*, Clovis, CA, Agriservices Foundation, 1973, p. 211.

56. Steven Lewis, “The Media of New Public Spaces in Global Cities: Subway advertising in Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Taipei,” *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2003, pp. 261-272.

57. Piper Gaubatz “Urban Transformation in Post-Mao China,” *op. cit.*; Piper Gaubatz, “Understanding Chinese Urban Form,” *op. cit.*; Duanfang Lu, “Remaking Chinese Urban Form,” *op. cit.*

58. Peter G. Goheen, “Public Space and the Geography of the Modern City,” *op. cit.*