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# THOUGHTS ON THE NEW CHINA





A little more than a half century ago China was an agrarian society. Now, in the twenty-first century, millions of rural dwellers are moving to cities at an unprecedented pace, and in so doing forming a new empire of urbanites. Urbanization, however, consists not only of creation on a massive scale, but also destruction on an equally massive one. When Chairman Mao said in 1940, “There is no construction without destruction” [*Bu po bu li*], he could not have imagined that his words would describe the ideological transformation of China as well as the physical one. China’s Open Door policy, introduced in the late 1970s by Deng Xiaoping, brought with it a cult of consumerism and a yearning for modernization in both the ideology of the Party and among average citizens. The subsequent introduction of joint ventures, foreign direct investment (FDI), and privatization exponentially increased the speed of urbanization and development. With the close of the Mao era, capitalism was deemed good and the entrepreneurial spirit was equated with patriotism; communists and capitalists joined hands to work towards the betterment of China.

Though having adopted a market economy, China still remains a society in which the government meticulously controls population growth, resource allocation, and the direction of economic development. This control extends to what is materially and spatially available to its citizens, ranging from restrictions on construction to the setting of precise parameters for living conditions. In 1980, for instance, most of China’s urbanites lived in low-rise buildings of no more than eight-stories; in older districts, people shared a common cooking space, showers, and bathrooms. In Guangzhou, a city that modernized early on, average living space was slightly less than four square meters per person.<sup>1</sup> The façades of most buildings, constructed to accommodate rapid economic growth, were poorly maintained. As a result, buildings looked dilapidated soon after they were finished. Green space and landscaping for residential compounds was all but nonexistent; individual units were little more than bare concrete boxes furnished with the essentials for daily life and a few family portraits. Since most housing was provided to the individual by his or her *danwei*<sup>2</sup> or work unit, residents were restricted to a specific site, which would become the universe where they would live, raise a family, and grow old. *Danwei*-provided housing was heavily subsidized and thus very basic, as a consequence of which most people’s monthly utility bills were actually higher than their rent. At the time, no one anticipated the change that would transform the urban landscape in which the Post-70’s generation was to grow up.

In the twenty-first century, after the realization of massive commercial and residential development under the auspices of ambitious urban-planning agendas, many Chinese cities are unrecognizable from what they were just a decade ago. According to Chinese law,

urban land in China is owned by the State; however, an amendment in 1988 allowed individuals to acquire a lease to use the land for a period of time, allowing them to build and own commercial buildings, apartments, and other structures. The “privatization” of land use, along with the average citizens’ desire to live more comfortably, has opened the floodgates for the private residential housing market. By 2004, average living space per person grew to almost fourteen square meters in the city of Guangzhou – more than triple what it was twenty years prior.<sup>3</sup> On the national level, per capita living space quadrupled from the early 1980s to the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup> The upward and outward expansion of existing cities – and the founding of entirely new cities – is largely responsible for the creation of this new living space. As incomes rose and mortgages became available to average citizens, people started to move out of their *danwei*-provided cubatures and into their own apartments.

Since the 1980s, not only has average living space significantly increased, so too has the range of residential and commercial buildings. Even the most basic apartment units available today are better equipped than the ones built during the Maoist era. White-collar and migrant workers alike are bombarded with advertisements of luxury residential developments or gated communities of stand-alone houses. Double-income households now have the option of taking out large mortgages for their dream house. Major Chinese cities, and even many second- and third-tier cities, are teeming with housing options which include high-end options ranging from Victorian-esque villas to recreations reminiscent of quiet American suburbia. However, the flipside of creation is destruction. In every Chinese city, historical structures make way for eight-lane highways and enormous residential compounds; far-from-old commercial buildings are torn down so new ones can be erected in their place. The urge to preserve has not grown nearly as quickly as the urge to build. With the destruction of traditional architecture and historically significant structures, one can already hear the older generations bemoaning the loss of cultural identity. Those who have witnessed China’s fast-paced urbanization are left to question: Where is the line between positive urban growth and negative urban destruction?

A larger proportion of Beijing’s old city has been torn down for new development in the last thirty years than in any other historical period. Shanghai on the other hand, even given its high level of exposure to the West and history of western colonialism, had virtually no high-rise office buildings in 1980; now, it has more than double that of New York City. The race to be bigger and faster is evident in China: one need only look toward the city skyline. China is home to the world’s largest shopping mall, automobile showroom, gated community, bowling alley, and skate park. In 2008, China also became home to the world’s largest airport. Chinese cities are growing at an astronomical rate. As much as half the Chinese urbanites are living in buildings built after 1980.<sup>5</sup>

In 1970, China’s urban population constituted slightly more than 17 percent of the total population. That number grew to slightly more than 40 percent by 2005. China’s urban population is projected to reach approximately 60 percent of the total population – that’s more than 1 billion people – by 2030.<sup>6</sup> Taking into account that China is home to the world’s largest population, this move from rural to urban areas constitutes the largest migration of people in the history of mankind. Never before have so many Chinese citizens had so much mobility. And yet, many social and familial bonds formed by rural villages, smaller local towns, and even *danweis* have disintegrated with this newfound mobility and urbanization. Many rural villages are home only to those too old or too young to move to large cities.

Conventional city planning was and still is inadequate when faced with the frantic pace of development in most Chinese cities. Despite the City Planning Act of 1989, master plans formulated by city governments are too broad, and zoning restrictions often go unheeded. The modern-day reality is that construction in cities is commercially driven, and corporate enterprises often marginalize public space. Chinese cities today are the result of both regional governmental planning and local commercial interests, but also derive some of their character from the fact that urbanites seem to always find ad hoc ways to reclaim personal space – such as adding attachments for storage or building makeshift living quarters out of whatever is available.

This mass urbanization spawned new realities that hadn’t previously existed. For China’s Post-70s generation, everyday life transpires amidst a seemingly never-ending cycle of destruction and reconstruction. Scattered amidst the skyline of many of China’s cities, one can see everything ranging from the new and shiny to the ill-conceived or borrowed. This new urban reality, along with the constant shifting of the material, spatial, and ideological, has led many of those in the Post-70s generation to question what is truly *Chinese*. There is a materialism that exists in Chinese cities today that did not exist in the 1970s. Some see this transformation as a sign of the deterioration of ideals and thoughtless adoption of Western consumerism. Thus, some long

for the past, nostalgic for the world sketched in the stories of their parents and grandparents. Some search for the ideals from their own childhoods – a time when becoming a white-collar consumer was the only respectable aspiration.

The creation and destruction of personal space – both in reality and virtually – has a major effect on the Post-70s generation. Everything from modern-day isolation and materialism to hope, creation, and new possibilities were spawned in China’s growing urban centers. The end of the 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century is perhaps one of the most ideologically confusing times in Chinese history. Having witnessed massive social change, in adulthood the Post-70s generation is witnessing the implications of a society based on mass consumerism and the loss of traditionalism and identity. And yet, this generation seems infused with an undeniable optimism, a reflection of the increased standard of living for millions and the budding of a new and modern Chinese identity. Indeed the riches and possibilities of today were unimaginable for the Post-70s generation in their youth. Through their optimism, one also senses the personal and social liberation of a generation who lived through their parents’ stories of the Cultural Revolution, food subsidies, Tiananmen Square, and, now, the hosting of the Olympic games in Beijing.

<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Ikels, “The Impact of Housing Policy on China’s Urban Elderly,” *Urban Anthropology & Studies of Cultural Systems & World Economic Development*, vol. 33, June 22, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Name given to a place of employment in the People’s Republic of China. While the term *danwei* remains in use today, it originally referred to a person’s place of employment during the period when the Chinese economy was entirely socialist and everyone worked for state-owned enterprises. At the time, *danwei* housing was considered a social welfare benefit and thus complied only with minimum housing standards. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danwei> (accessed June 26, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Ikels, “The Impact of Housing Policy on China’s Urban Elderly.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Daniela Fabricius, “China: New Architectures of Scale,” Lecture given at the Centre of Architecture, New York, December 3, 2005. Available at [www.peoplesarchitecture.org](http://www.peoplesarchitecture.org).

<sup>6</sup> UN Global Common Database (UN Population Division Estimates, 2005).