



POLITECNICO
DI TORINO

Honors thesis

MASTER DEGREE IN
ARCHITECTURE CONSTRUCTION CITY

Abstract

HUTONGS-TRANSFORMATION: a battle between memories

Tutors

Michele Bonino, Anna Barbara,
Florence Graezer Bideau,
Yves Pedrazzini

by

Anna Pagani

September 2015

While trying to embrace the degree of complexity that characterizes the architectural studies and profession, this master thesis aims at merging social studies and anthropology with the history of a nation and its urban landscape, in order to unveil the roles that memories have played and still do play in the protection of the historic urban heritage. To turn an intangible aim into a tangible outcome, the core this research focuses on understanding the explicit and implicit dynamics of the transformations that have been affecting the hutongs of Beijing from the 90s until today.

This work begins in Rome, from where “all the roads start”: the kick-off meeting of the SNISS project “Mapping Controversial Memories in the Historic Urban Landscape” deals with the serious contradiction that affects contemporary cities, on one hand pushing toward development –or economic growth, on the other promoting conservation –or sustainability. The hutongs, or the narrow lanes that cut East-West the orthogonal structure of the Chinese capital, reflect or mirror this bipolarity on the residential scale, on one hand changing over the years, on the other being protected and frozen in time.

To what extent collective memory is the maestro of these transformations?

In order to answer to this question, many others have to be faced: firstly, what is memory? Is it a track, a souvenir or imaginary, a sign of resistance, a battlefield? How do people express it and can they express it? Does a “collective memory”, in China, exist?

The fieldwork, together with the bibliographical research carried out in Lausanne, has been a crucial element for the collection of the proofs that, following a specific methodology, were aimed at exploring these open questions. The work has been organized into four sections. The first one is intended to display the objective use of the Beijing’s urban fabric: hutongs’ architecture is, sometimes, regarded as an important heritage to protect whilst, others, is turned into a *tabula rasa* for the re-building of the capital; this approach is deepened through some case studies, or three turning points that took place from the 90s in Gulou, the area of the Drum and Bell Tower. From the playground, the second section focuses on the players that took and are taking decisions on this fabric: like puppet manufacturers that set the rules for the tangible world; their social understanding of the notion of heritage as well as their subjective shift from different arrays are the invisible side of the battlefield. The third section, or the Intermezzo, is a selection of the many interviews that I made in Beijing from May to June, a foretaste of the controversies that shape the last part of this research. Finally, in the last section, the tug of war that shapes the bridges between the two sides of the river, attributing weights that might seem empirical to the different urban fabrics of the capital, is left as an open discussion where each ideology’s crash –and winner- has its specific consequences on the hutongs’ protection, challenging the meaning of “collective” memory itself.

To conclude, this research clearly demonstrates that the outcomes that are superficially perceived as absolutely contradictory hide, instead, many complex processes and in-betweens.

Furthermore, thanks to its deep specificity and entrenchment to the context, this work is intended to give a tangible contribution to the SNISS research project through four steps: the identification and categorization of the memory producers through an objective and then subjective analysis; the emphasis on the influence that memory have and have had

on this urban landscape; the establishment of a specific time frame; the mapping of the use and mutual influence of these memories in a spatial context.



The hands that build (or destroy?) the city.

Gulou, June 3, 2015.



Hutong-restyling: the new look of heritage.

Qianmen Street, May 30, 2015.



Au revoir, hutong: the memories' crumbling. Xianyukou Street, May 30, 2015.