

POLITECNICO DI TORINO  
SECOND SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE  
Master of Science in Territorial, Urban, Environmental and Landscape  
Planning  
***Honors theses***

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**China is far away. Sixty years of urban transition**

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The vastness and complexity of a nation like China prevent us to produce a discussion of the phenomenon of the Chinese urban transition able to capture all the facets related to the large differences that exist in terms of economy, resources and culture among the numerous territories. As several authors argue, in fact, it is almost impossible to offer a dissertation about the Chinese urban transition that is inclusive and indicative for the whole nation, also considering the absence of a city model that can be representative of it. For this reason, the thesis has not sought an exhaustive treatment of individual experiences but rather decided to present an analysis as thorough as possible of the causes and processes that led to the particular process of the Chinese urban transition over the last sixty years.

From 1949, the cities of the PRC have experienced a series of transformations that can be traced largely to the great number of structural changes lived by the political-administrative system and the socio-economic development of the country. The first three decades after the Revolution saw a low level of urbanization in which episodes of real anti-urbanism are grafted, being outcomes of both policies of centralized economy and forced industrialization.



Walking on two legs: agriculture and industry  
*Prosperity brought by the dragon and the phoenix* (Jiang Mi, 1959, 78,5x54,5 cm)

Starting with the economic reforms of 1978, however, Chinese cities have witnessed a deep change, economic but mainly spatial, of their structure, deviating more and more from the socialist model.



### Economic growth

*We must grasp revolution and increase production, increase work, increase preparation for struggle, to do an even better job (Yu Zhenli, 1976, 77x106 cm)*

Among the many faces assumed by this transformation, the main ones were the new heterogeneity of the urban population, the massive phenomenon of migration to urban areas, the spatial reconfiguration through the land reform, the development of new types of housing, the suburbanization and the internationalization of the largest cities, the changes in the administrative framework of urban systems.



### Modernization

*Long live the People's Republic of China (Gao Quan, 1979, 77x211 cm)*

Within the variety of themes and practices that have strongly interacted with each other creating a dense network of multi-sector, interdisciplinary and multi-issue connections in the urban development of China, there are three aspects that are transversal to the Chinese "urban experience" along both its two major socio-economic phases.

The first one is that of "under-urbanization". Defined as the will to reach great growth without a parallel increase in the urban population, it implies a lack of connection between the phenomena of economic development and urbanization. This is a sign recognized as typical of socialist economies and that has been empirically observed also in post-revolutionary China where, however, it has assumed some atypical traits if compared to other nations.

China's under-urbanization is indeed interpreted by many not only as the result of a form of government which can be considered right or wrong, but rather as the result of a series of obstacles to urbanization generated by the contradictions of the economic system. It was therefore an inevitable outcome of the policies actually put in place, but it did not occur accidentally. On the contrary it has been characterized by a partial intentionality. It was the imperative of industrialization that outlined Chinese urbanization, not abstract notions such as anti-urbanism.

The second aspect is that of the generalized interference of the state in all socio-economic aspects related to urban transition. The primary control intention was more than anything else that of containing urban growth, especially migration to the cities, within the limits of what was necessary for the sake of the state itself, ie economic growth, and not so much to suppress a priori whatever movement to urban areas.

The final aspect is that of uniqueness. It emerges as the most important feature of the Chinese urban transition from an "external and Western" point of view. China represents a special and distinctive case of modernization and development of a nation. The pattern of development adopted during both the Maoist period and the years of reforms have no parallel in other transition economies. The long-term trajectory of China's urban development shows more traits of uniqueness rather than of affinity to other nations.

A common mistake one can come across studying about China is in fact that of trying to understand and argue China's case according to Western concepts or according to the experiences of other developing nations, without seeking a careful analysis of the profound systemic differences which on the contrary diversify its context from the rest of the world.

In recent years, an impressive number of studies and analysis have been produced in the West on the so-called "China phenomenon" which, however, are often limited to a superficial discussion or are conditioned by the conventions of the Western thought. In most of them a true search of the roots and socio-cultural reasons responsible for the actual evolution of the Chinese urbanization is missing, reasons generating more relevant and long lasting effects than those produced by the best known and studied economic policies.

One wonders, therefore, what is China far away from? What is its urban transition far away from?

First of all China is far away from our understanding. Its complexity makes it difficult to produce a thematic analysis and leads necessarily to reason, even when addressing specifically the process of urbanization, about the "China system", meaning a set of socio-economic, political and cultural factors.

The Chinese urban transition is far from being theorisable, typeable or comparable to other processes of urbanization and, in particular, from being declared over.

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