



10 A SEARCH FOR A CULTURAL PARADIGM OF URBANIZATION IN EAST ASIA

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Culture and the City

East Asia can be defined both in terms of geographical and cultural entities. Narrowly, it includes China, Japan and Korea as geographical neighbors. As a cultural entity, it may cover those three countries, in addition to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore in the sense that they still use Chinese characters as the base of their mother tongues and share many cultural and spiritual denominators such as Confucianism and Buddhism. East Asian cities have gone through profound changes both in urban form and urbanism as a way of life since the late nineteenth century, both by indigenous enlightenment and alien domination over local culture. They have seen the manifestations of modernization, westernization and revolutionary nationalism. Especially during the last half century after the World War II, the East Asian city has been the material expression of development which has been largely devoid of cultural identity or has at least shown benign neglect of the cultural heritage in the urban process. Although it does not totally ignore arguments on the importance of cultural elements in urban transformation, it has suffered from academic parochialism and lack of methodological logic in the study of culture and the city. Comparative urban studies in terms of demographic and economic aspects are important, but one of the least explored areas for comparative urbanism is the cultural dimension. Culture is becoming an antidote for the formerly exalted norm of economic development, where the city has played as a locomotive for economic development and a symbol for national development.

East Asian cities have suddenly been awakened by the collapse of socialist utopianism and the surge of globalization. A strong sentiment is on the rise to reinstate their cultural identity in search of their own urban process and built environment. Rich urban traditions of the East Asian countries have been unfairly overlooked. The cultural importance of inserting a long-time frame into the analysis of urban phenomena is that it highlights the historical and ideological characters of urbanization. The Weberian bias on the Asian cities have persisted. Many writers have also responded that the Western city is mercantile and autonomous in its governance and plebiscite while the East Asian city is aristocratic, despotic and lacking of civic awareness. From the Western eyes who have lived by geometrical purity, Euclidean zoning and stylized architectural design, the Asian cities would be hazardous, confused and devoid of planning effort. They also like to point out the virtues of the Oriental quiescent and adaptive approach towards nature in contrast to the aggressive masculinity of the Western culture. East Asian cities compress enormous changes into a brief time span. There is the wide gap between where they are and where they want to be. A walled city has been opened to give way to a sprawling metropolis. Vernacular architecture and a traditional urban facade coexists with

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international and eclectic ones without intended harmony. Once-sacred and celestial cities have become secular and terrestrial. Spatial segregation by status has been replaced by sprawling office towers and high-rise apartments. Higher city (Yamanote) and lower city (Shitamachi) in Tokyo during the Edo period, Northern district (Bukchon) for mandarins and Southern district (Namchon) for commoners in Seoul during the Chosen kingdom, and Heavenly City and Mundane City in Beijing during Ch'ing dynasty are no longer meaningfully existent.¹ There is no spatial differentiation by a born status, rather space has been reshaped by income level and life style. The formation of a middle class in terms of norms and life style is in the making. The East Asian cities have just followed what the Western counterpart would have experienced after the Industrial Revolution. For them, Western cities have been a model to follow. Ironically, in this era of globalization, they begin to throw doubt on the Western urban paradigm and to trace back to their own identity from their historical and cultural heritage.

Professor Huntington's epochal essay "The Clash of Civilization" appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in the summer of 1993 announcing in its first sentence that "world politics is entering a new phase". By this he meant that whereas in the recent past world conflicts were between ideological camps grouping the first, second, third worlds into warring camps, the new style of politics would entail conflicts between different and presumably clashing civilizations. The great divisions among mankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. He particularly mentioned the fundamental disagreement, potential or actual, between the West on the one hand and, on the other, the Islamic and Confucian civilizations. It is quite a quite alarming statement in this highly urbanized world.²

The East Asian countries are highly urbanized except for China. China will follow the path of urbanization sooner or later without a policy of controlled migration and with a relaxed migration policy after the liberalization programs. The rate of increase in urban populations is particularly high in their large cities. At the turn of the this century, more than a half of the total population will reside in urban areas in China. The East Asian countries as a whole will be predominantly urban. Competition among mega-cities and their metropolitan shadows will become more intense. Rivalry among the nation-states will be replaced by the extended city-states. Then, as Professor Huntington admonished, is there any possibility of a cultural clash between the Oriental city and the Occidental city? The answer is not that simple. Although there is not an immediately prominent possibility because the Oriental cities are already too assimilated culturally and physically to revolt against the Occidental urban paradigm, serious efforts will be made to draw away from the Western path of urban civilization and to look for their own way of urban process. The East Asian intellectuals would have been disillusioned by the predicaments on the Western urban civilization which were succinctly laid out by a historian, Oswald Spengler and an urbanologist, Lewis Mumford in their theoretical and nostalgic formulation. The city was for them the central civilizing agency, an original creation of the folk, and the perfecter of

rational civilization. However, they regarded the modern urban community as neo-nomadic, dependent upon the spectacle of the ever-changing urban scene to fill the void of a desocialized consciousness. They distend these insights into a vision of imminent catastrophe and welcomed the demise of the modern urban civilization.

Confucian Wisdom Revisited

Among many cultural roots of the city formation in East Asia, Confucianism would be singled out as the most important cultural denominator. Many values nurtured by Confucianism, now internalized and no longer conscious, have provided a cultural and behavioral basis for everyday life and requisite urban transformation, and to create a leverage for sustaining urban society. The important Confucian values include filial piety, moral emphasis over material well-being, the concern with social harmony and an unobtrusive living with nature.

According to Confucian philosophy, the city has been thought to be evil. Anti-urbanism and ambivalent attitudes toward the city have been prevalent. Rural life is praised more than urban life. People engaged in manufacturing and commercial activities are regarded as mischievous and untrustworthy. There is a strong sense of agrarian romanticism even among modern urbanites. Many urban migrants want to keep a foothold in their home districts by leaving their parents or at least one of their family lineage in the rural area where they were born and raised. This Confucian bias against urban life may have influenced the general orientation of migratory flows and urban policy-making. In highly urbanized countries like Japan and Korea, urbanization has been accepted as an undesirable consequence of development. The governments have made every effort to slow down urbanization and to redirect urban flow from large cities to small-medium sized cities. In particular, they have repeatedly expressed their strong opposition to the excessive growth of big cities.

For decades scholars had followed the lead of Max Weber in considering Confucianism the main cultural impediment to national development by strong negative factors such as the existence of a powerful land-based aristocracy and the justification of authoritarian rule over individual freedom and creativity. However, this premise is no longer persuasive as the land-based aristocracy is already replaced by urban industrial capitalism, and oriental despotism by participatory democracy. The need is strongly felt to recapture some ingredients of the Confucian values which would help facilitate the on-going urban process in the East Asia while escaping the predicaments of the Western urban phenomenon.

Among others, filial piety or family royalty, usually expressed by the extended family and multi-generation family system, seems greatly facilitative to reduce the societal burden of urban governance for the aged and youth problems which are becoming crucial in a rapidly urbanizing world of East Asia. The public housing policy of Hong Kong which gives a preemptive right for the distribution of a public housing unit

to the extended family with a parent would be understood in the train of neo-Confucian thoughts. Internal designs of a housing unit and community services are also deliberately introduced to accommodate the extended family and especially parental care.

The extreme commodification of human relationships that subordinates social and cultural institutions to the utility of market tends to result in societal collapse. Another attribute of the Confucian virtues is a moral emphasis over material well-being and an emphasis on self-cultivation and education. According to the Confucian legacy, wealth can be the object of envy but has never been fully respected. The East Asian cities are not far from being physical and spatial expressions of Confucian thoughts. The East Asian city seems a relatively egalitarian city as compared with the Western counterpart. It indeed has both slum squatter and high income block. Nevertheless, the rich and the poor live side by side and even in a housing complex without much antagonism. Residential segregation by income and religion is hardly problematic and has never been a great social issue. The concern with social harmony which is a prime virtue of human beings has been already present in varying degree in the Asian culture. Anti-urbanism embedded in the Confucian philosophy dies hard. Urban and rural areas have never been seriously defined in everyday life. It can be productive to create a rural society as an alternative toward the future image of human settlements proposed by many visionary thinkers.

Sustainable urban development is becoming a catchword on a local as well as a global scale. Recognizing that world population growth is posing a threat on both the global environment, and that more than a half of the world population will live in cities in the end of this century, urban environmental issues will be of crucial importance in solving global environmental problems and will threaten the very survival of the Asian cities. If the urbanized China of 600 million inhabitants is motorized to the extent of the current Western car-ownership, the world can not afford the necessary oil reserves, and East Asia will be suffocated by air pollution and cross-border acid rain. As the Asian economic miracle is fading away and economic crisis comes close to financial moratorium, austerity measures are becoming a part of daily life for Asian urbanites and the government circles. Everybody knows that they cannot afford the urban life they enjoyed during the heydays of economic prosperity. They are trying to find an alternative way of life, naturally retreating to the humble and frugal life which the Confucian thinkers have long embraced and preparing for the worst scenario. Many give up their private car, install energy-saving measures and even go back to the rural homeland where they used to live. Although it does not necessarily say that the East Asian city is more sustainable than the city in other part of the world, the Confucian city may be more flexible to adapt itself to the urban hardship waiting to be escalated and may be more facilitative to solving global environmental problems.

Internal Characteristics and Urban Texture

Viewed from high above, the East Asian cities are not greatly different from the Western cities, but upon closer examination one may find that even the smallest urban neighborhood offers a wide range of texture and color, and there are marked differences in the way of life.³ One may also find that living patterns and spatial arrangement at the microscopic scale is persistent to change. In the Western cities, diversity between neighborhoods is more visible, while diversity within neighborhoods is more prevalent in the East Asian cities. There are hidden dimensions in the use of space and different pattern languages in urban context of human behavior which are not easily seen but are deeply rooted in their cultural characteristics. Physical appearance as a built-form and the man-made environment become more prone to assimilation than behavioral and attitudinal change.

A Western architectural critic, J.M. Richards, who has spent some time in Asian cities gave his image of the Japanese cities as follows:

"the Japanese city is not design that had been done badly; it is the negation of design, an urban happening with its own special vitality. As to why it has come about in such an extreme form in Japan, I formed a personal theory that the special circumstances of Japanese land use make the city the only place where an impetuous, anarchical, instinctive life is possible—The Japanese, consequently and instinctively allow themselves freedom from rules and disciplines in their cities. The city has become the Japanese jungle."⁴

From the Western eyes who are accustomed to the geometrical street layout, the Euclidean zoning and stylized architectural design, the Asian cities including the Japanese do not derive their dynamism from the efforts of urban planners and architects but just the reverse may be true. Confused and hazardous like a jungle as it is, the Asian city is a city of humanity and convenience. Each section of urban neighborhood has various services, shops and eateries, many of which are open until midnight and some people are waiting to serve customers. The Asian urbanites know how to live in a crowded city. Temporal patterning and mixed land use are a part of their ordinary life style. The spatial differentiation of dining, sleeping and living rooms in a house is largely the Western cultural habit which is highly space-and-energy consumptive. Communal facilities like the bath are a favorite place to meet people of the neighborhood and to share information, grief and joy. In the rapidly urbanizing Asian cities, we would not be able to afford the Western life style.

It seems very crucial to identify what have been changed and what have not been changed, and what are the cultural characteristics to be preserved. The built environment of the city is the amalgamative product of polity, economy, culture and even historical incidence. It can be expressed in urban form and iconic artifacts, which are not necessarily replaced by the existing one but very often coexist in harmony or in contradiction. The city is a contesting ground for many

conflicting forces. They can be alien, ethnic, religious, ideological and socio-economic in a specific place on a given time. We have observed the changing perception of the same urban space: Imperial Palace Square in Tokyo; Tienanmen Square in Beijing; Kwanghwamun and Kyongbok Palace in Seoul; the Thirty-Sixth Street in Hanoi. Contesting forces are still very much working to shape the East Asian cityscape: the recent demolition of the Japanese Government General Office as the remnant of colonial imprints in Seoul; a skyscraper's vision in Marunouchi against invisible Imperial Palace in Tokyo; the Governor's House and the Bank of China building in Hong Kong; and factional locals and mainlanders in Taipei.

Confucianism as a cultural denominator of the East Asian cities would not have resulted in the same consequence but has been deflected in a prismatic manner. Differences among the East Asian cities can be more conspicuous than differences between the East and the West. However, while convergence between the Western and the East Asian cities takes place from a macroscopic perspective, there is more distinctiveness in the microcosm of urban texture and urban life which is largely embedded in the Confucian legacies. The East Asian cities are very much in transition, and are struggling to find their own identity. Korea has also reached a juncture in urban history that is calling for substantial social, political and spatial restructuring to renew the base towards the twenty-first century. The city is a key element of this theme, with efforts to construct new forms of societal guidance both as the built environment and as an arena for the formation of culturally enriched and inclusive social processes. After all, the city is a moral entity expressed by cultural characteristics. The present endeavor does not pretend to foretell what the East Asian cities culturally should be. But it is the beginning of a long and thorny journey exploring the Asian way of urban transformation which ensures itself from the risk of blind imitation of the alien urban paradigms.

Notes

¹ Choe, Sang-Chuel, et.al. *Culture and City in East Asia*, Oxford University Press, 1997.

² Huntington, Samuel. "The Clash of Civilization," *Foreign Affairs*, 1993, summer issue.

³ Heikkila, Eric J. "Los Angeles: La-La-Land" in E.J. Blakerly and R.J. Stimson eds., *New Cities of the Pacific Rim*, University of California at Berkeley. Monograph 43, 1992, pp. 2-17.

⁴ Richards, J.M. "Lessons from the Japanese Jungle," *Ekistics*, August 1969, pp. 75-76.

