

Traveling Ideas, Concepts and Experts – China’s search for new ways of urbanization

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Globalisation – if looked at as a platform – facilitates experts to exchange knowledge, ideas, and approaches, and cooperate cross-culturally. On the basis of a globalized world, it seems everyone can ‘read’ certain cities independently on their specific location, since these specific cities and urban agglomerations are even labeled as global cities.

At a global scale, borders seem to continuously vanish, and the world gets ‘smaller’ and larger at the same time, since it provides us with many more opportunities and chances. Planning concepts, urban design approaches, and architecture have joined the international trade goods, which are traded globally according to the market and the demand. Traditionally, the exchange happens from the more developed to the less developed regions and countries.

China has been on a search for new planning approaches since the rapid urbanization started in the 1980s with the economic growth based on the politics of Deng Xiaoping¹. In the first phase of urbanization (ca. the first ten to fifteen years) these planning approaches have been found in western concepts.² It seemed there was little time and experience to look at the matter critically; it was rather the time for great experimentation on an urban scale never witnessed before. During this time, foreign experts played an important role, exporting their visions and approaches intrigued by the opportunities the market and demand offered in China. Some probably have seen this as their chance to realize their dream of cities, which could have never

¹ Deng Xiaoping was the Chairman of the People’s Republic of China from June 1983 to November 1989.

² Mostly US-American planning and urban design concepts have been adapted during the 1980s and 1990s.

been realized in western contexts, due to the different political, economic, geographic, and cultural frameworks and regulations. Others – probably mostly unintentionally – approached the task of supporting the Chinese search for planning concepts with a rather ‘colonial’ approach by feeling the need to teach, educate, and convince the Chinese of the superiority of the western concepts. This was surely fostered by the willingness from the Chinese side to reach out specifically to these concepts that provided the ‘superior’ western world with liveable cities, which seemed to be up to the latest standards in their realization.

It has now been several years, however, since the international narrative of the Chinese urban development started to sometimes be referred to as a “copy and paste” approach. This, of course, is a simplification of the actual reality, but not completely untrue.

Instead of looking for “inspiration”³ abroad, which is a common practice around the world, in some cases successful examples were copied from Europe as well as from the US without the necessary adaptation or transformation process implemented in the Chinese context. During the first phase of the Chinese urbanisation, the dire need for urban expansion and infrastructure, combined with the political system, made up for the lacking planning concepts. The built environment, housing, industry and infrastructure, was needed desperately, hence it turned out to be secondary to how well or how badly cities were planned and executed. Furthermore, in some cases it was specifically asked, from the Chinese side, to plan a European city, of course by commissioned experts from Europe. Perhaps this time of the Chinese urbanisation can rather be described as a phase of experimentation.

The past couple of years have shown, however,⁴ that a new generation of planners, urban designers and architects have been employed; educated not only in

³ In this context, it means the process of looking for existing references, analysing and understanding what makes them successful, and then pushing one’s own envelope by trying to implement the newly found ideas into the existing context with the necessary process of transformation and adaptation in order to create long-term and sustainable solutions.

⁴ Since March 2013 Xi Jinping has been the Chairman of the People’s Republic of China and has since set a new emphasis on Chinese-ness, rather than foreign influences in a very holistic understanding. This has influenced the approach in planning as well as the changing economic situation and the real estate situation in China. This paper is not going into further detail in this regard since it would greatly expand the frame of this paper.

China but also abroad, familiarized with both Chinese and non-Chinese experiences, approaches, and concepts.

This does not mean that the influence and impact of western and foreign concepts and practitioners loses significance per se; it surely does mean, though, that roles have changed.

This paper does not intend to criticize the importance and relevance of comparing and learning from different approaches globally. To the contrary: it argues that the broader and abstract concepts are very much comparable on a global level, similarly to the aims and goals of future cities. The mismatch lies in the lack of a detailed understanding of local realities and specific processes of realization, hence in this paper it is argued that contextuality increases its importance despite globalization, or because of it.

Based on the long-term experiences within the western world, the approach cannot simply mean a total change of the existing Chinese planning system; the need and relevance for this needs to be formulated from “the inside” rather than from “the outside” to achieve a long-term and sustainable change.

But it is very well within the responsibility of western advisers and experts to be aware of the frictions, differences, and challenges, and to share our knowledge, on a meta-level, from these past experiences in planning. This especially needs to be taken into account when we, as experts, get commissioned by the governmental body and asked for advice or teach young professionals and students from China and other parts of the world as well as from our native countries. It is in our best interest to create sustainable cities and for this to happen it is indispensable to broaden our views and understanding of the significance of the context and local imbeddedness of concepts which might be comparable and exchangeable on a meta-level.