

From Muslim Street to Brilliant Plaza

Constructions of Urban Space in Kunming

Research >
China

China is in transition. During the past two decades a new urban landscape came into existence, which seems to have severe consequences on the character and function of public space. This article throws light on the Chinese city as a transitional object, presenting a short case study on the way processes of modernization and globalization affect the public domain of Kunming.

By Leeke Reinders

Throughout the past two decades, a remarkable process of urbanization has been taking place in parts of China, where regional centres are developing into global junctions. With the substantial scale and pace of these developments the local importance of these centres has become completely overshadowed by the repercussions of their new international orientation. Numerous animal metaphors are used to interpret current urban developments in China and other parts of the Pacific Rim. Analogies with dragons (the Chinese dragon), tigers (the four fast-growing Asian economies), and frogs (mega-urban sprawl development), somehow suggest the astonishment of the Western observer, who mainly sees the growth of Asian cities as a spontaneous and unbridled natural organic process. Indeed, many want us to believe that a whole new urban landscape of mega-cities and conurbations is taking shape, surpassing existing definitions of city and urbanity.

The recent urbanization of China is a continuing process, rapid and arbitrary, initiated and controlled by the Chinese state. For a long period the Communist Party actively slowed down the growth of cities, as the city was considered a threat to the sovereignty of the state for geo-political and military reasons. In 1978, however, a series of economic reforms were formulated, including the selection of four Special Economic Zones and, at a later stage, several 'open cities', 'open economic regions', and 'special economic and technological zones'. A phased transition from a socialist to a liberal economy was set in motion, drastically affecting the Chinese urban landscapes. Three interrelated processes of urbanization, modernization, and globalization, namely, a relentless urban population growth of 200 million people, the construction of 450 new cities, and rapidly growing flows of people, capital, ideas, and artefacts, had marked repercussions on the public space in Chinese cities in various ways.

Kunming, located on a plateau 1,920 metres above sea level, is a city of 3.5 million inhabitants in south-west China, near the border with Laos, Burma, and Vietnam. The city has a long history of intercultural encounters and confrontations. The city had been threatened by the armies of the Tang dynasty, was rebuilt by the Mongolian prince Kubilai, and was taken over by the Ming dynasty during the fourteenth century, and by the sultan of Dali in the nineteenth century. The French, who took control over Indochina, tried to capitalize on the copper, tin, and lumber resources in the region. The city also functioned as a gateway to the Silk Route. Since the Second World War, when the allied forces installed a base at Kunming, the city grew in size. Many industries were launched in and around the city, and it became home to a stream of immigrants fleeing from the Japanese. Today the city is marketed as a passageway for tourists, a 'city of eternal spring', set in clear blue skies, and the pristine natural scenery of parks and lakes.

Over the past few years, however, the most drastic changes have appeared. The city is in transition from communism to a 'New Era', as a recently realized hotel in Kunming is named.



1 Public space in a side street off of Zhengyi Lu, Kunming.

An illuminating case in point is the area around Zhengyi Lu, an amalgam of contrasting public places in the centre of the city. The side street, leading to the main square and roundabout (photo 1) is part of a Muslim district lined by two-storey shophouses on both sides. The upper floors are used as living space; the ground floors as a commercial area. A walk through these kinds of streets is a rich social, visual, and sensual experience: clouds of smoke escape from the drainage systems and sizzling frying pans fill the air with smells. There is a fluent transition between the inside and outside area of the shophouse. Outside space is used for the display and storage of eatables, and the preparation of meals. These meals and drinks can be had inside the shops and in part of their outer area. Multifunctional, hot and steamy; it is streets like these that satisfy notions of a 'typical', lively Asiatic urban realm.

When you turn the corner a totally different world appears (see photo 2). Over the last ten years the state has initiated the construction of a whole new city centre, consisting of shopping malls, warehouses, luxury apartment buildings, offices, banks, hotels, billboards, and fast-food chains. These physical elements are designed on the basis of what might be called a Chinese version of modernistic architecture, comprising facades of blue plate glass, white-tiled exteriors, triangular-shaped mirrored buildings, and complexes topped with pagoda replicas. The roof of Brilliant Plaza, which is illuminated by fluorescent lights in the evening, resembles a nineteenth-century European passage. Widened and heightened roads and sidewalks paved with large marbleized panels traverse this area. In Kunming a new retail trend has been set in motion. Whole new shopping neighbourhoods have been created, including a Wal-Mart and a Price Smart, a members-only shopping mall. A new shopping mall, which will accommodate different European and American 'flavour zones', meant to guide the future tastes of new Chinese urbanites, is under construction in central Zhengyi Lu.

Notably, these drastic physical transformations bring about relatively small social changes. Young girls stroll along the wide boulevard on platform shoes, mobile phones within reach and young crowds hang out around Kentucky Fried Chicken, where fifteen servers welcome the guests. For most of the day, however, the employees in the shopping arcades outnumber the customers. The modern city is a state-sponsored project, in which few are able to participate. Amidst the changed material and symbolic decor, young Chinese are giving shape to their version of a Western-style metropolis. Inside the glass-panelled entrance of Brilliant Plaza a man pauses to expel his saliva into a gleaming new litter basket: a cultural habit adapted to new circumstances. <

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2 Promenade in the shopping district on Zhengyi Lu, Kunming

