

Reflections from the APA's 2008 China Study Tour  
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The opportunity to join the American Planning Association 2008 China Study tour was an amazing experience. Both the study tour and the Global Planners Network Congress reinforced my interest and love for planning. The knowledge and the lessons I learned will truly be a part of me for the rest of my life. In the course of 14 days the treasures of China were revealed enriching my understanding of China's ancient foundation and China's modern potential.

From the beginning I was bubbling with excitement. On the first day, after waking up early with jetlag, I saw a Beijing that I did not expect. Beautiful landscaped medians with blooming roses, flowers and great trees along the avenues, people walking, biking, and crowding the bus depots. Manicured streets with an army of street sweepers stationed at every turn. The buses were filled and bus stop attendants waved flags to direct the traffic. The streets were wide and the cars familiar. Volkswagen, Honda, Lexus, BMW, Hyundai, Toyota, Mitsubishi, Citroen, Audi, and Peugeot raced beside our bus. Senior Zheng and Junior Zheng guided the way describing the packed subway station and the ring roads as we headed towards the National Museum Library. On our first morning we were treated to an exclusive tour of ancient city maps. Real, valuable, ancient and complete maps of Beijing, Xi'an, Nanjing, and Hangzhou, the four main cities we would visit in the coming weeks. The tour was an amazing site especially for someone who loves old city maps. We could see the development of these ancient cities and could better understand the way Chinese cities were designed. Chinese settlements used a compass to orientate to North Pole, building cities to face south. Also the capital cities paid special attention the Feng Shui, blocking the negative northern energy and opening the city to the positive southern energy. The temples for the emperors were placed in the best locations and the streets moved along cardinal directions.

Sadly the weather on the first day was overcast and questions about pollution made the sky ominous. The juxtaposition of the trees, roses, and flowers made the pollution issue especially odd. We continued to learn about the ancient cities with a personal briefing from Wang Jun. Mr. Wang

stressed that Beijing was an ancient garden city. Similar to traditional urban planning schemes for garden cities, but with hutongs (narrow alleys) built quickly for neighborhoods and markets. The original design for Beijing did not allow for automobiles to thrive and now Mr. Wang sees the impact of cars saying that “cars take place of people in cities and eat a lot.” What a critical view for planners to have. Mr. Wang’s key points were equally valuable first “Fabric is more important than skyline”; second “Street is more important than building”, and third “Traffic policy is more important than engineering.” From just the first day the ethos of planning in China was unfolding. The ancient capitals and their attention to detail; the differences to look out for between Beijing, Xi’an, Nanjing, and Hangzhou; and the impacts of modern culture on these ancient cities, most importantly the impact of the automobile on cities designed thousands of years before.

On October 23<sup>rd</sup> the skies changed. A cold front revolutionized my perspective, creating a beautiful cold-sunny-blue-sky day. We traveled to the Mutianyu section of the Great Wall of China built in 1600 A.D. by the Ming Dynasty. The Wall is a symbol of Chinese space and a theme that I was happy to see every place we went. Because of the wall no battles were fought. Enemies saw the formidable boundary and went where it was not. At the top of the Wall looking at Beijing I realized



The Great Wall-Mutianyu of China on a beautiful October day.

that this was more amazing than I expected and to have such a beautiful day made it all the more enjoyable.

Another symbol of Chinese space is the public garden or park. At the Temple of Heaven, both a tourist attraction and 270 hectare public space, I felt the area was most distinctively Chinese. Just at the entrance there was an eclectic scene of couples dancing, soldiers drilling, children lining up, and retirees singing. All of these people orchestrating their morning routine. The cypress trees made enjoying the park easy and they also allowed for private spaces to meet and exercise. Large groups of excited children teamed together in distinctive uniforms; possibly happy to be out of the classroom or maybe charged by the sunshine. In a stunning turn of events the crowds around the Temple of Heaven began to part, soldiers appeared and chaos became restrained.



Children on a field trip at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing.



A soldier blocking the entrance, just a few minutes after the photo of children (left).

The quickness of the event took our group by surprise stranding two members stuck on the other side of the cordon.

As the fog of jetlag lifted, we said goodbye to Beijing and hello to Xi'an. "Orderly" Beijing was replaced by scary traffic, lots of buses, busy people, and new legions of sweepers. The evening was capped off with my new favorite dish dumplings. Every type of savory meat and vegetable packaged in delicate pastry steamed to perfection. I felt like I could have eaten them for every meal and still looked forward to the next. Early morning provided the opportunity to explore a nearby street market. Vegetables, hair scrunchies, Pittsburgh Steelers shoe inserts, pomegranates, and Fuji apples filled the makeshift stalls along a narrow street. Feeling out of place I chose not to venture into the depths of the busy informal commercial district.

In the afternoon Professor An Jiayao, of the Institute of Archeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, explained the background of Xi'an. Xi'an was the capital city for 13 dynasties over a total of 1200 years. Its location at the center of China with the Weihe River and high mountains was ideal. The city was chosen for its agricultural and water resources, as well as its soft loose soil. Professor An explained some of China's symbols like the circle as the symbol of heaven, the square as the symbol of earth, and together the symbol of earth at the center of heaven. This symbology shows itself in ancient and modern currency and in city design. It clicked with me how many symbols have persevered in the Chinese culture: dragons, lions, lotus, earth and heaven. Despite thousands of years and thousands of miles, these basic themes permeate every neighborhood.

In a surprising moment our fortunes multiplied when the Deputy Director of the Terra-Cotta Museum Tian Jing escorted us beyond the tourist line to stand with the Terra-Cotta soldiers. Walking out on the dirt I was so nervous and my heart was still beating fast for an hour afterwards. Even our guide Senior Zheng never thought he would be in such a position. Only high-ranking ministers (President Clinton, Queen Elizabeth II, and Fidel Castro) were allowed to go to this spot. There we were the honored guests of China, a sign of their respect for the American Planning Association and our shared interest in historic preservation. To see the statues up close sealed in my

mind the power of China's culture. Constructed in 230 B.C. every statue is unique, originally they each had bronze weapons, clothes and painted faces. The opportunity was like being time traveler and the emotional impact must be the same.



Examples of the unique Terra-Cotta Army faces caste in 230 B.C.

Personally I love city walls; therefore Xi'an will always be a special city. The walls of Xi'an provide a unique view of the city and a 9 mile bike path. From the top the surrounding parks reflect the same activities seen at the Temple of Heaven. Badminton players, calligraphy writers, exercise groups, even an opera performance, everyone outside enjoying the public space on a cool day.

A place (zhou 州) reachable by small wooden boat (hang 杭) and the terminus of the Grand Canal; Hangzhou (杭州) was the capital city of China from 1138-1279. With the beautiful West Lake and cosmopolitan center, Hangzhou is rightfully a leisure city, a popular destination for honeymooners and tourist. A growing city Hangzhou adds 300 cars everyday. Interestingly Hangzhou does not charge for license plates while cities like Shanghai charge over 30,000 Yuan (\$4,300). Hangzhou's ancient city was impacted by geography which did not allow for a center axis or a palace placed in the south. Instead the center axis curves along the terrain and the palace is in the west.

Leaving Hangzhou we traveled by train to Nanjing a city with over 50 institutions of higher learning. Nanjing has three distinct city districts surrounded by a city wall that follows the natural typology of the area. There is a myth that the wall was shaped like the emperor's face. The emperor was said to have been a homely man who never allowed paintings of his likeness. So instead of a painting the city planners built the city's wall to reflect his profile. A possibility for when one traces the outline of the wall there is a nose, a neck, a tuft of hair, and an eye. In 1911, after the revolution that ended empirical rule, Nanjing was the location for the new Republic of China. The leaders hired American Architect John Murphy to plan the capital city. Murphy was influenced by Washington D.C. and designed a grand diagonal boulevard to bring together the primary government offices. A diagonal road is not something a Chinese planner would do. However the boulevard style is now used widely throughout China. This street design allows for bikes, mopeds, and pedestrians to use the outside lanes while automobiles and buses dominate the center lanes.



A simplified map of ancient Nanjing. Notice the nose and chin on the right.

The APA worked with the City of Nanjing to do historic preservation in the oldest district. The plan advocated preserving the street system. The researchers found locations of water wells and where the streets widened. This neighborhood, near the Zhonghua Gate, was cut in half by a new road. The subway was built under the road but no station was planned for the site. Instead the engineers based station location on engineering standards not human standards. While the planners, along with the APA, fought for a station close to the poor, historic neighborhood, the engineering standards placed the station near the graveyard not the neighborhood. This is a sad story and a clear reminder that infrastructure standards often drive urban design.

The Global Planners Network Congress opened my understanding of planning. I had never thought about slums or poverty in the way that Paul Taylor helped illuminate on the first day of the congress. Taylor explained the problems of unplanned urbanization in the developing world. In the 1970's 70% of the globe was rural by 2030 60% will be urban. Astonishingly this is the equivalent of a new city being built every month the size of Hanoi or Madrid. Access to clean drinking water and sanitation complicates this speed of development. Taylor stressed that rapid urbanization without commensurate economic growth is the main issue underlying the increase of slums. As planners we must pay attention to the informal sector economy. Slums can be improved through the informal sector. However slums and informal settlements do not exist on planning maps. They have no postal addresses and most places have no way of getting aid to the people without "urban renewal". The challenge for global planners will be creating win-win solutions and pro-poor policies.

China represents the future of the global economy. The sheer gravity of the population and the potential for development draws all eyes to the ancient cities we toured. Seeing China for myself built up my respect for the Chinese people. While I have only skimmed the mountain tops of this life-changing experience, I look forward to exploring the valleys for years to come. I hope that within the next 5 years I will have an opportunity to return to China. The contrast between China in

2008 with China in 2013 will be the most valuable part of this trip. I hope in future trips I am stunned by the progress China will make in environmental protection, in transportation, and bringing prosperity to the millions of Chinese still living in poverty. I will be forever grateful to the APA's commitment to students. Thank you.