Beijing City and World Heritage

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Abstract
The ancient city of Beijing built along the traditional urban planning framework based on eastern cosmology, ideas of governance, *fengshui* philosophy and traditional customs has been much changed over the centuries. This paper argues that the central axis of Beijing is an urban landscape containing a significant heritage legacy worthy of consideration for heritage listing. The paper extensively outlines the ancient city planning that Beijing central axis emulates, along with significant developments that occurred under the Manchu and also during the Cultural Revolution.

The paper discusses the Central Axis of Beijing in terms of the Historic Urban Landscape process, a tool proposed by UNESCO to capture all the aspects of the urban landscape and improve management and conservation.

Key words: Beijing, central axis, historic urban landscapes.

Introduction
The ancient city of Beijing was built in accordance with advanced planning concepts and design. As the most outstanding representative of Chinese ancient capital cities, it boasts a profound connotation of eastern cosmology, ideas of governance, *fengshui* philosophy and traditional customs. It once possessed a whole set of defence systems including the magnificent city walls and moat, a distinct urban form featuring the royal palaces, princes’ mansions, a special street system with featured alleys called *hutong* and rich intangible cultural heritage. In the later part of the 20th century, revolutions plagued the city, taking away the city walls, moats and much monumental architecture. People who love the legacies of the ancient capital were greatly distressed, almost on the brink of desperation.

But the spirit of the ancient city is still with us, especially the concept of a central axis, one of the characteristics of an ancient capital. Not only is it omnipresent, deeply rooted in Chinese philosophy, morality, customs, rules of social relationships, politics, language, design composition, architectural design and site selection, and aesthetics, but also is found in the existing practices of the historic city of Beijing. Even the most important modern political architecture, such as the Monument to the People’s Heroes which memorialises the contemporary revolutionary history, Tiananmen Square, rebuilt on the site of the old imperial city gate, Chairman Mao Memorial Hall which houses Mao’s remains all are located along the central axis. The intact historic architectural composition still reflects the layout, material combination, spiritual concept and aesthetics characteristic of the central axis which is one essential design feature of the ancient capital.
Figure 1: The overall layout of the Central Axis of Beijing City. (Source: Wei Qing and Guo Zhan)

Figure 2: A bird’s eye view of Beijing Central Axis to the south. (Source: Wei Qing and Guo Zhan)
Whilst it is not appropriate to nominate the historic city of Beijing as a whole for World Heritage, it is still reasonable and feasible to nominate the Central Axis of Beijing. It cannot be simply replaced by an extension of the Forbidden City or the Temple of Heaven which are already situated on the axis and have been included in the World Heritage List. To encompass its rich meaning, it is necessary to appreciate the significance of the whole concept and composition of the central axis of Beijing.

**Ancient Beijing City and its development**

While many European capital cities, such as Paris, Rome and London all have central sections built to a plan that accorded at the time to accepted town planning principles, ancient Chinese capitals over the past 3,000 years were always built in accordance with city planning principles and in the form of a square. The symmetrical structure, reflecting the Chinese material civilisation, spirit, morals and customs has exerted a great influence on the development of Chinese culture and history.

‘The Office of Winter’ in the 2nd century BC *Zhouli Kaogongi* or *Rites of Zhou* (edited by Liu Xin in the first century AD)\(^1\) is a famous Chinese historical document that records when building a capital city with an area of nine square li, workers should build three gates on each border. Within the city, there should be nine horizontal avenues and nine vertical avenues. In each avenue, nine carriages can run side by side. On the left side of the imperial palace should stand a temple, and on the right side an Altar of Earth and Harvests. In front of the main hall of the palace should be the imperial court. At the back of the hall of the empress should be the marketplace. The areas of the courts and markets are both several hundred of square bu.

The book also records that when building a capital city, the workers use a stud to measure the horizontality of the ground, a hanging rope to guarantee the verticality of a wooden column and observe the shadow to tell directions. Workers take the wooden column as the centre and draw a circle. By noting the shadows on the circle at sunrise and sunset, they can tell the east and west. By noting the shadow on the circle at noon and observing the North Star, they tell the north and south.

Over the past 600 years Beijing witnessed the Yuan Dynasty, the Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty. It now has become one of the most distinguished capitals in the East and the bearer of extensive Chinese history and culture. The axis represents the main value orientation in the construction of a capital city in ancient China. The spatial pattern of the Central Axis of Beijing has a long history, dating back to the ‘principle of building the Chinese ancient capital from site selection to urban layout based on the significance of the centre. Throughout history, the king always chooses the central place as the capital, the centre of the capital as the palace and the centre of the palace as the temple.’ (Lu Buwei, *Mister Lu’s Spring and Autumn Annals*)\(^2\) The Axis illustrates the political value with the emperor as the centre in the view that ‘the centre is the supreme’ and ‘It is an etiquette that the emperor lives in the centre of the country’. (Xunzi)\(^3\)
Confucianism created an ethical system in order to achieve a society in great harmony. The middle way of Confucianism represents the ancient ethical value, its aim being to maintain balance and harmony. ‘Standing in the middle place and do not deviate.’

‘The middle way is the root of the world.’ (These quotations are from the ancient Confucian texts, *The Book of Rites – Golden Mean*). The aesthetic values of beauty and kindness were deemed to concentrate in the centre as illustrated in the following quotes: ‘The gentlemen know the essence, remain loyal to their duty and beauty resides in them.’ (*The Book of Changes*); and ‘Rites and music exist in the middle’ (*The Book of Rites*).

The ideal layout of a city can be traced back to the *Rites of Zhou: Records of Construction* (ed. Liu Xin). With a central axis, the palace in the centre and a rigid structure it is an exemplary model for the capital city and has a strong impact on the spatial arrangement of the later city. While its influence was only partially evident during the Han and Tang dynasties it became more obvious in the later periods.

Zhu Xi (1130–1200 AD), the neo-Confucian philosopher of the Southern Song Dynasty had a grander concept. He took China as a frame and designed an axis running through the center of the country from south to north with the capital city sitting on the axis.

The capital Ji is situated in the middle, with the mountains around, Yellow River surrounding in the front, Mountain Tai on the left like a dragon and Mountain Hua on the right like a

![Figure 4: The spatial pattern of Central Axis has a long history, dating back to the principle of the centre for Chinese ancient capitals from site selection to urban layout. Contemporary Beijing is based on the Song Dynasty design — Zhu Xi’s capital Ji. (Source: Wang Zilin, *The Fengshui of the Royal City*, The Forbidden City Publishing Company, 2009, p. 173)](image)

![Figure 5: Development and changes of Beijing Central Axis during the three dynasties — Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911). (Source: Wei Qing and Guo Zhan)](image)
tiger. Mountain Song looks like a front desk, mountains in southern Anhui Province like the second row of desks and five ridges in south of Yangzi River look like a third row of desks. This geographical location makes Capital Ji the one choice for a capital city of the whole country since ancient times. Based on today’s archaeology it has the sea on the left and Taihang Mountain on the right, Juyong on the north and a river on the south. It has the finest location in the world (Zhu Xiyulei, quoted in Wu Changyuan 1788)4.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties in Beijing, this philosophy was at its peak, becoming the mainstream way of thinking and envisaging a city. This shows us how our ancestors pursued ‘the middle way’.

As Professor Liang Sicheng, the most famous conservation master in China, said; ‘All of the great Chinese traditions and heritage of architecture... ancient cities were built in accordance with city planning.’ He also said: ‘After the Yuan Dynasty, the Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty, Beijing, with much experience of city planning, has become an excellent and typical Chinese capital city’ (Liang Sicheng 1951). But, unfortunately, although in the 1950s and 60s a group of men of letters led by Liang Sicheng tried hard to protect the cultural site of Beijing, many city walls and alleys were dismantled. Many people at that time believed that Beijing’s historic fabric and cultural heritage would disappear. However the major site of the capital, especially the buildings along the central axis and some typical alleys remain intact. Thus, the signs of culture and history of Beijing can still be found and memorialised by the Chinese people.

The continuity evident in the ancient city form and central axis means that Beijing is an outstanding example and evidence of ancient capitals of oriental civilisation. In addition Beijing boasts many other exceptional material cultural remains and intangible cultural traditions of considerable scale and system. Examples include:

- historic districts – including the well preserved hutong street system, courtyard houses, gardens and traditional vernacular architectures of Northern China;
- the waterway system – including natural rivers, lakes and canals which support the life and prosperity of the ancient capital; and
- altar and temple architecture for worship as well as other religious and folk architectural systems reflecting the ancient cosmology, diverse religions, various government approaches, science and technologies, social forms and customs.

In considering the current conditions the aim must be to improve the conservation and promotion of the cultural heritage of historic Beijing in a holistic and integrated way. While starting with a World Heritage nomination to make the conservation effort more effective,
thorough, systematic and lasting, it will be a complex task and it is still hard to define and verify the appropriate approach and general framework for nominating the old city of Beijing for World Heritage.

However, this old city of Beijing is such an enormous size that the rich cultural heritage accumulated with its long history still offers many potential options and themes, sufficient to be examined separately against World Heritage values. Among these the Beijing Central Axis Cultural Landscape has the clearest logical structure and is the most feasible option that could be considered as an approach for immediate discussion. Preliminary thought suggests it could be included under categories 1 and 3 of the cultural landscape categories recognised by UNESCO in 1992:

Category 1: landscape designed and created intentionally by man; and

Category 3: an associative cultural landscape. (UNESCO 2013)

The preparation of a possible nomination for the Beijing Central Axis Cultural Landscape for World Heritage

The largest feature of Beijing is the south-north central axis with a distance of 7.8 kilometers, along which many memorial buildings are located. Standing at the top of Mt Jingshan, the whole central axis is visible with Yongdingmen (outer city gate) at the southern end, the Drum Tower at the northern end and the Forbidden City on the axis. Liang Sicheng suggested in 1951 that ‘No other cities in the world have such grandeur and perfectly shows her unique style as Beijing’ (Liang Sicheng 1951).

A World Heritage nomination for the Beijing Central Axis Cultural Landscape would need critical comparison with other global cities such as Washington and New Delhi in order to outline the similarities the nominated property has with other properties and the reasons that make the nominated property stand out. The comparative analysis should aim to explain the importance of
the nominated property both in its national and international context (UNESCO 2013: Annex 5: 108). Beijing Central Axis landscape includes the imperial court, Mt Jingshan and the symmetrical temples, the ancestral shrine and the Altar of Earth and Harvests, the Temple of Heaven and the Temple of Agriculture. After the northern nomads (the Manchu who established the Qing Dynasty 1644–1911) moved into the Central Plain, the asymmetrical lakes were built according to their practice to not live in places with water. These lakes are the exception to the symmetry of the axis as even the renovated Tiananmen Square and the surrounding symmetrical buildings of the Great Hall of the People, the National Museum, the Huabiao ceremonial column, Stone Lions, the Monument to the People’s Heroes and the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong all reflect the concept and the physical framework of the Beijing Central Axis.

When it comes to preparation of the nomination there will certainly be complicated and controversial challenges. These, however, can be addressed during the process of nomination. A critical factor to address will be that of integrity, including the issue of a few, but perhaps necessary reconstructions. Other issues could be discussed within a given timeframe. It would, for example be useful to view a World Heritage nomination proposal through the lens of the Historic Urban Landscapes (HUL) paradigm and the related recommendations and policies of UNESCO.
HUL ‘provides the basis for a comprehensive and integrated approach for the identification, assessment, conservation and management of historic urban landscapes within an overall sustainable development framework’. (UNESCO 2011) Taking the HUL approach to the conservation and promotion of the Beijing Central Axis Cultural Landscape could promote the role of cultural heritage as a driver for sustainability and possibly assist in becoming eligible for the World Heritage List.

Compared with the characteristics of World Heritage such as monument(s), site(s), group(s) of buildings, the cultural landscape is the result of interaction between humans and the environment and the specific relationships between the different elements in the site. These elements contain both preeminent elements and related elements that are less significant and inevitably will be lost.

Some heritage colleagues are worried that the idea of HUL would open the doors for a flood of new nominations that would completely upset the World Heritage List. An important consideration here is that the HUL document emphasises

… that the new Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape will not replace existing conservation approaches, but is a tool to integrate policies and practices of conservation of the built environment into the wider goals of urban development, in respect of the inherited values and traditions of different cultural contexts. This tool is a ‘soft-law’ to be implemented by Member States on a voluntary basis (UNESCO 2011).

However HUL will not be a new heritage category (for World Heritage purposes). Rather, identifying HUL is a question of improving planning and management control so as to guarantee better protection for sites that have been recognized for their Outstanding Universal Value. For example, in the case of the Beijing Central Axis Landscape discussed above, the question is to identify a terrain which meets the criteria of the Operational Guidelines. Identifying the HUL of central Beijing would mean looking at the nominated areas within their setting or broader context, as ICOMOS has recommended in the Xi’an Declaration of 2005. This does not mean that we should not be able to speak of the historic urban landscape. Of course we can and we should. HUL is a management and planning approach, where the aim is to provide some control for the non-protected areas to avoid negative impacts on protected areas or monuments.

Regarding Beijing, a friend of mine wrote that:

I think it is not only a question of making comparative studies, but especially to justify the significance in a universal context. It seems that ‘square’ and ‘circle’ have been the two sacred forms from very ancient times. These were used in ancient Egypt, India, Mexico, China, and Persia, and they are still the basis for town planning. We can just look at Le Corbusier. It would be interesting, but perhaps difficult to discover who came first. Of course, such an idea as a central axis is fundamentally symbolic and intangible. However, it is based on physical evidence. Therefore, another question relates to integrity, which needs careful assessment. It will be interesting to discuss all of this.

I agree with this viewpoint.

So I prefer, when thinking of the state of art of the old city of Beijing, inspired by the concept and recommendations of HUL, to borrow one ancient Chinese idiom, which is ‘it is not too late to mend the fold even after some sheep have been lost’. Similarly, the general layout and many essential structures still exist, so to protect the cultural heritage of the old city as a whole, there is still much to work on. If we could act immediately and hold on to Beijing’s Central Axis heritage, there is still hope, challenges and a prospect of great success.

The most significant, effective and hopeful act that we could choose to do for such a goal, possibly would be to prepare a nomination for ‘the Beijing Central Axis Cultural Landscape’ to the World Heritage List.
References
Wu Changyuan (1788), Chen Yuan Shi Lue, reprinted 1981.

Endnotes
1 The Rites of Zhou is one of three ancient ritual texts (the ‘Three Rites’) listed among the Confucian classics. The text was renamed by the first editor Liu Xin (c. 50 BC–AD 23).
2 Lu Buwei, ed., Lushi Chunqui, Mister Lu’s Spring and Autumn Annals, an encyclopedia-like compendium compiled in c. 239 B.C. Lu Buwei was prime minister to the ruler for the state of Qin who became the first emperor of a newly unified China establishing the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC).
3 Xunzi (313–238 B.C.), was one of the representative philosophers of the school of Confucianism. ‘Da Lue’ is a chapter in the book Xunzi, written by Master Xunzi and his disciples.
4 Zhuzi yulei (Dialogues of Master Zhu) Volume 2 Li Qi Part 2, quoted in Volume 1 Xing Sheng (Geography) of the Chen Yuan Shi Lue, a collection of historic literature on Beijing’s urban evolution edited by Wu Changyuan of the Qing Dynasty in the late 18th Century, supplemented by his own observations.