Contested Heritage in the Ancient City of Peace

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Abstract

As the imperial capital of thirteen dynasties Xi’an, formerly known as Chang’an (eternal peace), houses a legacy of many of the most important periods of Chinese history and is one of the great archeological centers of the world. This legacy of political and cultural dominance places Xi’an at the forefront of debates on cultural heritage and its role in the evolution of China in the 21st century. Xi’an is currently under a triad of influences from processes of globalization, urban transition and domestic and international tourism. In recent decades and particularly since the dawn of the new millennium, the historic core of Xi’an has been the focus of much discussion as the city embarks on an ambitious plan to transform the densely populated areas of the inner city into a functioning replica of the Tang Imperial City. This paper discusses some of the impacts of current regeneration plans for the historic legacy of Xi’an and in particular explores the likely consequences of the Tang Imperial City Renaissance Plan on the socio-cultural lifeworld of the local Hui population of the Muslim quarter of the city. The renaissance plan, which will result in significant changes to the physical and social structure of the city, highlights the challenges and contradictions inherent in attempts to reconcile the historic legacy of the city with the needs of the local population on the one hand, and that of the contemporary development of Xi’an as a “tourist-historic city” on the other.

Introduction

As the former capital of thirteen dynasties Xi’an houses a legacy of many of the most important periods of Chinese history. Xi’an is regarded by many as “the cradle of Chinese civilisation” and an important component in the formation of Chinese national identity. Xi’an’s role as an imperial capital dates from the eleventh century B.C., and as the capital of the Qin, Tang, and Han’ dynasties, among others, the city has been at the centre of some of the most important periods of Chinese history, when China was leading the world in terms of commerce and culture. Alongside the expanse of the modern city lie many sites of national and international importance including Xi’an’s Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644 A.D.) City Wall – the most complete city wall that has survived in China and one of the largest ancient military defensive systems in the world. Other historic relics include the site of the Tang Dynasty Palace garden at Lianhu Park, the Great Mosque of Xi’an, the Wild Goose Pagoda, Xi Wu Tai, Zhu Yuan, Guang Ren Si, the Drum and Bell Towers and numerous other sites.

Contemporary Xi’an, like other large Chinese cities, is characterized by mushrooming skyscrapers, elevated roads extending to suburbs of gated communities, development zones and high-tech parks (Wu 2007). However, in Xi’an the headlong rush to keep pace with the “first tier” cities of Eastern China is somewhat muted and is likely to follow a different trajectory as the city begins to more forcefully articulate its position as one of the most important cities in antiquity and one of China’s longest serving capitals. Today Xi’an is a modern metropolis comprising nine districts and four counties with a population of 7.6 million inhabitants (Xi’an Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2007). Although many of Xi’an’s historic remains survived the ravages of China’s recent history including the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, some had fallen into a poor state of repair until relatively recently when a combination of political and economic reforms associated with China’s post 1978 transition to a socialist market economy brought renewed attention to the city’s historic legacy.

The reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping following the Communist Party of China’s (CPC) 11th Congress, which proposed a shift from political struggles to economic reconstruction, witnessed the decentralization of economic management to the local state and China’s transformation from a socialist political state to a socialist developmental state (Oi 1996). More recently, Wu (2007: 16) suggests that many Chinese cities have now surpassed the developmental state which emphasized industrial growth policies and are now “entrepreneurial” cities, which commodify “place” as a space commodity. As part of the new development paradigm tourism has been embraced as a potentially lucrative source of foreign exchange earnings, as well as a vehicle for affirming national identity under socialism. In an interview in 1987 Han Kehua, the then Director of the State General Administration for Travel and Tourism noted that “as a developing socialist country, our purpose is to enhance international understanding and friendship and, at the same time, increase foreign exchange income and promote China’s socialist construction.” (Guojian 1987: 26). As was noted by Zhang and Lew (2003: 4) “tourism was designated as a growth unit of the national economy in the late 1990s and over two-thirds of the provincial governments in China have committed to making tourism one of their pillar industries”. In responding to these changes in national and provincial economic policy, Xi’an was perhaps better placed than many other similar sized cities to capitalize on its wealth of heritage tourism resources.

In 2005, Xi’an city government embarked on the Tang Imperial City Renaissance Plan, a three-phase project which is planned to run from 2005 to 2050. For many Chinese, the Tang dynasty (618 – 907 A.D.) was one of the most important periods in Chinese history when China was at the pinnacle of its development. Some of the most important surviving examples of Xi’an’s historic legacy are to be found in the inner-city district of Lianhu, Xi’an’s Muslim Quarter (Huiminfang). The renaissance plan, if brought to fruition, will result in the transformation of inner-city Xi’an into a functioning representation of the former Tang imperial city. Phase one of the renaissance project is already under way with the demolition of significant numbers of industrial and residential...
premises close to historic sites, as well as the relocation of local residents to other districts of the city. Before discussing the renaissance plan in more detail it is useful to consider the background of city planning in Xi’an during an extremely turbulent period of Chinese history following the demise of imperial rule.

City Planning Background

After the fall of the Qing Dynasty (1911) Xi’an began to develop its industrial base. This resulted in the development of a number of small-scale factories in the textile and manufacturing sector. These developments which attracted increasing numbers of rural workers into the city were, for the most part, uncoordinated and thus brought increasing pressure on the provision of housing, water supply and other public amenities. It was not until the Communist takeover in the 1950s, when Xi’an was designated as a major development area that the city began to adopt planned approaches to development. After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power Xi’an, together with Beijing and Lanzhou, was among the first cities to engage in formal city planning. In 1953, under the influence of the USSR, the establishment of the national economic planning system shifted the emphases from cities as arenas of consumption to that of production, with city planning being regarded as “the continuity of national economic planning” (Cao 1984, cited in Wang 1991: 364). Of the 156 Soviet assisted large-scale industrial projects entered into as part of the national economic development plan, 17 were located in Xi’an. The rational for such a heavy emphasis on the industrialization of Xi’an was to balance development in this inland city with that of the coastal regions to the east. There were also national defense considerations. Thus, light industry such as textiles and electronic instrument manufacturing formed the main priorities of the first Five Year Plan (1953 to 1957). The first overall city plan was approved by the State Construction Commission in 1954 and was to cover a twenty year period from 1953 to 1972. This plan defined the nature of the city as “light and precise machinery and instruments manufacturing and textile industrial city” (Ma 1986, cited in Wang 1991: 365). Under this plan, land in Xi’an was zoned into functional areas such as industrial, administrative, commercial, residential and cultural and educational areas. An important aspect of the plan was the protection from demolition of the historic City Wall. In 1961 the inclusion of the City Wall on the provincial list. The central government selects those of national importance and places them on a national list. These of historic sites under protection” accorded national monument status and guaranteed its protection in subsequent urban plans. Under the plan Xi’an’s street pattern and road system were developed from the straight cross grid pattern of the Tang dynasty Changan model. While this first city plan can be considered to have had a positive impact, there were a number of problems in implementing aspects of the plan. Changes in central government policy and a disproportionate emphasis on production over residential land use resulted in housing shortages and a lack of public amenities. This, coupled with government sponsored migration programmes which brought mostly single people from the east of the country resulted in a rapid increase in the population of Xi’an. China’s urban population grew steadily at between three and four percent between 1950 and 1965 and saw a particularly rapid increase between 1958 and 1961 as a result of industrialization associated with the Great Leap Forward. Towards the end of the 1950s policies associated with the Great Leap Forward resulted in the decentralization of economic development powers to urban district government, subsequently spurring the construction of small-scale industrial units throughout the city. This increasing drive towards production further deteriorated the living conditions in residential areas which were now becoming partly industrialized. By the early 1960s policies associated with the Great Leap Forward were beginning to be revised and city planning came under the control of economic planners. Subsequently, the City Planning Bureau was disbanded and review of the Overall City Plan abandoned. In 1963 the central government introduced a three-year ‘adjustment period’ (1963 to 1965) in which many small-scale factories were shut down and their employees returned to their rural origins. By 1966 the Cultural Revolution saw the emphases of national development shift once again, this time towards remote rural areas. During the Cultural Revolution China’s urban population saw a substantial decrease. With the focus of national development now firmly on rural China large scale and planned developments in Xi’an were once again replaced by piecemeal uncoordinated development with little in the way of oversight. In Xi’an as elsewhere in China, land use planning changed with changes to economic policy and these changes were usually aligned with the relatively short-term but very powerful Five Year Plans. Thus, city planning in Xi’an became the victim of short-term economic policy. As the period of the first Overall Plan for Xi’an came to a close (1972) there was no government institution in place to update the plan. Indeed, there was no legal city plan between 1972 and 1980. Economic restructuring towards the end of the 1970s saw the state enterprises established under the centrally economic planning regime scaled down and replaced by hybrid economic entities that produced “commodities” (Wu 2007: 10). As part of this marketization process property rights were rebundled with the separation of land ownership and land use rights. This quasi-privatization of state assets into commodities has resulted in the exchange value of land taking precedent over its use value.

The second Overall Plan for Xi’an (1980 to 2000) was approved by the State Council in November 1983 and like its predecessor had a planning horizon of twenty years. The new plan defined the nature of the city as “a city of advanced sciences, culture and education with textile and machinery manufacturing industries as the main sectors, with the tourist trade based on the protection of the city’s historical features” (Xian City Government 1980, cited in Wang 1991: 374). While the new plan contained many of the characteristics of the 1953 plan, an important aspect was the requirement by central government to protect historic buildings and architecture. Thus, as well as continuing to protect the Ming City Wall originally built between 1374 and 1378, other sites of historic importance were also nominally protected. While the new plan deterred industrial development in the historic core of the city and sought to expand green areas in the city centre, preservation policy relating to historic sites and architecture tended to focus on individual buildings. The Historic Buildings Management department, a department outside the control of city planners, has, since 1961, had responsibility for listing and grading buildings. This department lists all historic buildings in the city. An equivalent authority at the provincial level selects what they consider to be ‘important’ sites and places them on a provincial list. The central government selects those of national importance and places them on a national list. These
lists are credited with protecting many important buildings during the Cultural Revolution. However, inclusion on such lists offered little in terms of conservation and up to the late 1970s the city wall and other important sites were in a state of decay. The discovery of the tomb of Emperor Qin Shi Huang just east of Xi’an city in 1974 gave increasing emphasis to the role of tourism in the following decades as the city became the focus of the burgeoning Chinese domestic tourism sector as well as that of international visitation. This brought renewed attention to the preservation and conservation of the historic core of the city. For the first time the 1980 city plan incorporated an acknowledgement of tourism as an important aspect of the local economy and conservation and protection policies were extended to conservation areas around listed buildings under the following criteria: (a) absolute protection zone (the building and open spaces within its original boundary), (b) impact zone (relating to the height of the historic building, and (c) environmental zone (control of skyline and landscape of a group of listed buildings).3

The Urban Planning Act (1990) and the Urban and Rural Planning Act (2007) represents milestones in China’s planning legalization and have resulted in a substantial strengthening of the legal framework for planning in China. At provincial level the People’s Congress has issued local regulations within the framework of the Act. Meanwhile, the central government is attempting to correct the excesses of certain economy-oriented ideas by advocating a policy of scientific development in the context of a people-oriented and harmonious society. Under the current policy new planning strategies for both urban and rural areas are to be considered as a coordinated whole. For example, the 2007 Urban and Rural Planning Act emphasizes the integration of urban and rural areas plans.

While recent legislation has provided a legal framework for urban planning in general, there still remains a paucity of comprehensive regulation and enforcement. Also, regulation relating to the preservation and conservation of historic cities is at best fragmented with no clear direction in terms of designation, protection or management. Currently, China has no law on historic cities, and their protection still relies on relevant laws for city planning and cultural relics (Zhang 2004). Where regulations do exist, implementation suffers from weak enforcement as local officials often view such regulations as obstacles to their cities’ growth and to personal promotion, and hence readily defy them (Lam 2008).

Heritage and Hyper-Traditions

For any historic city, protecting built heritage is a political as well as a historical and cultural process (Serageldin et al. 2001: xiv). Heritage, as an economic, political and socio-cultural resource is invested with meanings and values, which can be evoked to validate a variety of perspectives on current and future development. Several decades of discussion on questions of ownership, interpretation and representation of heritage attests to its utility as a vehicle for the articulation of cultural identity as well as to its power to buttress the “guiding fictions” that shape peoples’ attachment to the nation (Shumway 1991; Pretes 2003). Many of today’s most important historic cities call upon aspects of heritage in mediating their cultural inheritance to contemporary inhabitants as well as to those who constitute the increasingly important “experience economy” (Pine & Gilmore 1999).

The development of heritage tourism is often regarded as a vital ingredient of urban regeneration. Unlike other economic sectors where city centers lose out to peripheral areas, in the case of tourism, the urban core dominates the metropolitan area (Fainstein et al. 2003: 1). Historic city centres become the focus of a global “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990) as well as a stage for the deployment and dissemination of hegemonic discourses of patriotism and nationalism. The role played by cultural heritage in the development of national identities has been discussed at length in recent years (e.g. Nijkamp & Riganti 2008: 35). Indeed, it has been suggested that “the viewing of heritage sights by domestic tourists is a key aspect in the formation and maintenance of national identity” (Pretes 2003: 125). In China, as elsewhere, heritage is an evocative and value-laden concept and its utility as a catalyst for urban regeneration through tourism has intensified debates concerning its value as a social, economic and cultural resource. Thus, the development of heritage tourism products is but one manifestation of a politicized and contested concept which can be harnessed to serve a didactic purpose in fostering a sense of nationhood, or more locally, a sense of belonging (Handler 1988; Bohlin 1998; Meethan 2001). As Pretes (2003: 125) suggests, “the viewing of heritage sights by domestic tourists is a key aspect in the formation and maintenance of a national identity, especially when nationalism is understood as an ‘imagined community’. Under such conditions, heritage cannot be but dissonant” (Tunbridge & Ashworth 1996; Graham et al. 2000).

Tourism, Space and Commodification in Xi’an

In recent years, particularly since China’s entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001, China’s urban landscape has undergone a transformation which has seen the emergence of new patterns of social organization and consumption, including the emergence of a substantial domestic tourism industry. In China, domestic tourism emerged after the 1978 reforms not as part of industrial modernization but as part of a state led promotion of a service sector modeled after Western postindustrial consumer economics (Nyiri 2006: 70). This has resulted in adoption of Western influenced planning and design in urban centers across China.4 There are numerous examples of Local Government officials returning from “Grand Tours” of European or North American cities brandishing images of the places they had visited and demanding that local Design Institutes and Construction Bureau’s mimic the design styles depicted (Yu & Padua 2007). State involvement also influences the development of tourist attractions and often results in the kind of visual uniformity that makes the central squares of Chinese cities so predictable (Nyiri 2006: 72). In many cases the major considerations are cosmetic with no regard to the surrounding socio-cultural context or the use value of such spaces, often resulting in the exclusion of local activities deemed to be visually intrusive (Yu & Padua 2007; Cosgrove 1998). Logan (2002: xiv) suggests that the modernization of Asian cities is producing a physical sameness and blandness that denies indigenous distinctiveness as well as resulting in a loss of community memory associated with traditional built forms. This is a reflection of what Lefebvre (1991) refers to as the production of space through social practices. The act of organizing space – allocating certain people and activities to one location and other people and activities to another – transforms space (O’Neill 2009: 98) and structures the field of possibilities through

Today many Chinese cities are characterized by economic and cultural globalization and modernity in which traditional cultural heritage and urban forms are increasingly recognized, and often reinvented, for their resource value in the concentration of facilities and attractions that may be available to visitors and local residents (Logan 2002: xii-xiv). The Tang Imperial City Renaissance Plan seems to epitomize these characteristics. Like numerous other cities, Xi’an seeks to distinguish itself from its “rivals” by turning to, and exaggerating, the power of the local through hyper-traditions.5 However, in Xi’an’s Muslim quarter the spatial practices of regeneration are confronted with the reality of China’s socio-cultural diversity which challenges major interpretation of this historic districts to embrace, and accord value to, the carriers and transmitters of traditions, as well as their habitus and habitat (Kirshenblat-Gimblett 2004: 53). Therefore, while the consequences of globalization may be increased homogenization of culture as witnessed through, for example, urban “regeneration”, the counter argument is that these processes also spawn and support a reassertion of local cultural identities.

The Renaissance Plan

The catalyst for the plan, the Tang palace city of Chang’an, was originally laid out in three distinct sectors which gave emphasis to the feudal hierarchy with the emperor’s residence on Longshou plain north of the city. This stood apart from the central imperial city where government officials lived and worked, and was separated from the outer city, the home of the common people (Ma 1997). The imperial city was divided into eastern and western districts and further sub divided into a “chessboard” pattern of many smaller smaller districts. Today the city still retains elements of the ordered layout of the Tang period and the Renaissance plan seeks to replicate aspects of these designs.

The “Tang Imperial City Renaissance Plan” one of the major projects of the Shaanxi Provincial Government’s 11th five year plan, comprises three phases to include, phase one, 2005 – 2010, phase two, 2011 – 2020 and phase three 2021 – 2050. Although little physical remains of the Tang dynasty are to be found in Xi’an today, the rationale for the plan is the protection of the city’s heritage as well as the reconstruction, interpretation and (re)presentation of elements of Tang dynasty culture and the rejuvenation of urban space in the city’s historic core. The report on the 11th congress of Communist Party representatives of Xi’an city identified the principle tasks for the five years to 2012 to be: “to accelerate the implementation of the renaissance plan, giving priority to the protection and utilization of cultural heritage”, as well as “the strict control of development”, “a reduction of population density” and “working towards integrating the ancient and modern features of the city” (Chinese Communist Party of Xi’an 2007). Under the current “general plan for Xi’an” the main function and industries within the historic core of the city will be commerce and tourism. He (2008) identifies seven guiding principles of the Tang Imperial City Renaissance Plan as follows:

- Loyalty to history and creativity:
  Promote the preservation of the historic city and the integrity of the environment.

- Represent Chang’an (Xi’an) heritage and articulate neighborhood traditions:
  Emphasizes the integration of the concept of “Lifang” with modern street layout and neighborhood design to incorporate Tang style with distinct local character.

- Green transport policy:
  Improve the transport system in order to develop environmentally friendly modes such as underground, public bus, bicycle, and pedestrian walkways. Increase the utilization of public transportation systems and reduce reliance on motor vehicles.

- Maintain and represent the axis of the ancient city:
  Strengthen the Axes of transport and show historic layout which is neat and symmetrical.

- Sustainable and environmentally friendly developments:
  Emphasize the Tang city which had an abundance of water through the diversion of the Qujiang river and utilize this to enhance the green belt around the historic city wall and provide “green space”.

- Harmonious development between old and new:
  Segment the “old Tang city” into neighborhood areas with characteristics in order to represent the ancient and modern characters of the city.

- Develop a unique identity for Xi’an as a tourist city:
  Restore the old layout and street names to enhance the identity of the area. Build up the tourist sightseeing system through emphasizing (a) the City Wall, (b) thoroughfares inside the walled city, and (c) the green belt immediately outside the walled city.

According to the Xi’an Urban Planning Bureau, over the timeline of the renaissance plan the population of the “old city” will be reduced from their current level of 700,000 inhabitants to circa 200,000. According to Xi’an City Government in 2010 the population of the historic core of Xi’an will be reduced by 40,000, and by 2020 a further 80,000 inhabitants will be relocated. Currently population density is relatively high with little in the way of green or open spaces.3 The plan proposes the demolition of residential and industrial buildings close to sites/sights of historic interest, including close to the City Wall. This aspect of the plan has been ongoing since 2005 and large numbers of buildings have been demolished and their residence moved to alternative locations both within and outside the district. The plan aspires to reconstruct the old city in the architectural style of the Tang dynasty, as well as to retain existing examples of the Ming, Qing and Mingguo periods. In addition to the replication of Tang dynasty heritage in the historic core of Xi’an, a National Heritage Park (Daminggong) is already under construction. Daminggong was a very important imperial summer palace built circa 634 during the Tang dynasty. The National Heritage Park of Daminggong will be in addition to the Tang Paradise Park which has been open in Xi’an for several years.

The Tang West Market

The Tang West Market, located South West of the imperial city, is a very important component of the renaissance plan. During the Tang period Xi’an (Chang’an as it was then known) was the largest metropolis in the world with a population of over one million (Chen et al. 1997: 256). Chang’an city covered an area
of some nine times larger than Xi’an city today. There were two major markets in Chang’an, the East Market for domestic trade and the West Market for international commerce through the Silk Road. During the Tang period (618 - 907) Chang’an was perhaps the most important fashion, trade and entertainment centre in the world. During this period, contact with the outside world was not merely permitted, but encouraged as envoys, merchants, scholars and missionaries converged on Chang’an (Ma 1997).

The New Tang West Market development is a 3.5 billion Yuan investment comprising three distinct architectural styles: (i) Tang dynasty architecture, (ii) some of the architectural styles of countries along the Silk Road, and (iii) West-European architectural styles. All demolition on the site of the market was completed in 2005. The first phase of the development was completed in 2008, with the second phase due for completion by 2010. The West Market development utilizes the concept of Jiu Gong in the arrangement of the different sectors of the market (Figure 1). When completed, the development will offer a variety of products and services to visitors, including an antique market, department store, an international trade centre, luxury products exhibition, West Market Museum, several hotels up to five star, the Silk Road Experience centre, and business services. Quintessentially postmodern in design, the New West Market includes a variety of historically unconnected elements with multiple meanings. West Market can be characterized as consumption-based regeneration through the construction of “cultural facilities”, a practice which can be witnessed in the “consumption quarters” of numerous cities across the globe. The New West Market incorporates three important interrelated processes in the development of contemporary China: (i) marking (and making) the cultural identity of the Han majority, (ii) transforming cultural representation as capital accumulation, and (iii) shaping the behaviours of consumers (Ren 2007).

The City Wall

Zhu Yuanzhang, the first Emperor of the Ming dynasty (1368 - 1644) enlarged Xi’an City Wall built initially during the Tang dynasty (618 - 907) creating the modern structure which now stands 12 meters tall, 12-14 meters wide at the top and 15-18 meters thick at the bottom. Since the early Ming dynasty the wall has been restored three times. In 1568, the wall was rebuilt with bricks. In 1781 the city wall and the gate towers were refitted. More recently (since 1983) the Shaanxi Provincial Government restored the city wall again. The wall covers 13.7 kilometers (8.5 miles) in length with a deep moat surrounding it. Xi’an City Wall is one of the primary heritage resources of the city and has previously been included on China’s list of nominations for UNESCO World Heritage Status. The City Wall plays an important role in the evolving Renaissance Plan for a number of reasons: (a) it is a tangible representation of the central Imperial City which during the Tang period housed government offices and their personnel, (b) it provides much needed recreational space along its perimeter which is utilized for daily activities such as morning exercise, open air performances and socializing, and (c) it provides a popular means for touring the inner-city on foot or by bicycle along its circumference. The Renaissance Plan proposes the utilization and development of the mante along the perimeter of the wall to increase water based recreation in the inner city and the expansion of its green areas. One proposal which has been put forward for future development around the perimeter of the City Wall is the construction of a transitional space or “meta wall” (Figure 2). The “meta wall” proposal includes the development of residential and hotel accommodation and integrated transport system to cater for the predicted sixty million tourists to the city by 2020. According to Henrik Valeur, of UID, one of the consultancies involved in developing the concept under the title “Transform Xi’an”:

This project attempts to explore the economic potentials of mass tourism to support the preservation of historical sites, without the tourists destroying those sites and the local environment. It does so by proposing a “meta-wall” around the historic city wall of Xi’an. A continuously differentiated perimeter structure intended to concentrate tourist accommodation, but also to provide public facilities for both the tourists and the local population. In addition, the project offers an environment friendly transportation system located in a green buffer zone between the two “walls” (Valeur 2006).

While the “meta wall” is unlikely to be brought to fruition in its original form, the concept of “Transform Xi’an” is fairly typical of many urban regeneration projects in China where foreign design concepts are coupled with institutions who are responsible for their development and implementation, though the original design ideas may be “lost in translation” (Yu & Padua 2007: 258).

In addition to its role as one of Xian’s primary heritage resources, as well as its recreational potential for the local population and tourists, Xian City Wall plays an important role in the formation and maintenance of identity for those populations residing in its vicinity. For the Hui population of Lianhu, the city wall represents not only a physical boundary of the old city, but it also represents part of their cultural inheritance, a historic accumulation that stretches back hundreds of years (Feighery 2008). As with other important heritage resources in the city, the vicinity of the city wall has witnessed extensive clearances of commercial and residential premises as physical and visual access opens these “sites” and “sights” for consumption. The resultant relocation of Hui residents outside the district represents not only a physical move, but also a social and cultural rupture. As Gillette (2000: 52) reported, “only in the quarter could Hui eat without anxiety, attend the Mosque with ease, find suitable marriage partners, host proper life cycle rituals, and associate with neighbours who share their predispositions”. Developments associated with the City Wall such as the New Tang West Market project may be seen as part of a broader process of the cultural incorporation of the city wall into the surrounding community, a process that has been underway for centuries (Feighery 2008).
with the city wall are likely to impede the transmission of social and cultural inheritance of the local Hui population as the vicinity is transformed into a commodified space for tourists and affluent middle class residents. This is likely to result in the disruption of traditional modes of social practice where family, cultural, religious and commercial life is closely integrated and interdependent.

The Renaissance Plan in Social Context

Much of the extant research on “urban regeneration” has focused on understanding the physical structure and economic consequences of development. The social benefits and costs of regeneration projects have received less attention in the literature. In a recent contribution to the literature, Hayllar et al. (2008) outline some of the potential social benefits and costs of urban tourism precinct as follows:

![Artists impression of “Transform Xian” a proposed development along the outer perimeter of Xi’an City Wall, from Co-Evolution, an exhibition project by Danish-Chinese architecture sponsored by Danish Architecture Center and UID.](image)

Based on an analysis of urban developments in Europe and Australia Hayllar et al. (2008) conclude that there are substantial social costs and benefits associated with urban development in an era when city based cultures of consumption are on the rise as the middle class move back to the cities. While the social, economic and political context of urban development in China varies considerably from that of Europe or Australia, many of the costs and benefits associated with the Renaissance Plan for Xian are remarkably similar. The new West Market and the proposed “meta wall” developments in Xian can be regarded as an archetypal precinct development in which affluent residents and tourists mingle and consume.

While local government officials embrace postmodern influences in relation to urban planning and design they exhibit a rather different perspective on “national minorities” who are predominately characterized as colourful attractions for both overseas tourists and Chinese domestic tourists (Graburn 2001: 77). The State in China has used tourism as a powerful tool to assist in bringing the ethnic minority populations into the ‘main stream’ by promoting and developing tourism activity based on their cultural heritage (Oakes 1997; Sofield & Li 1998). In China, the urge to achieve economic prosperity has resulted in a trend of transforming ethnic minority cultures into efficient, convenient, and profitable tourism resources. This is achieved through the integration of minority ethnic culture with commercial initiatives in the development of tourism products, as well as through the standardisation and authorisation of minority ethnic culture by the State. The designation by the Mao Zedong’s administration of fifty-six Chinese ‘races’ or Minzu, which was the result of the 1950 – 1956 ethnological missions aimed at amassing sufficient information on the Chinese people so that minzu could be identified and classified: this has been instrumental in these processes. Another important influence on the commercialisation of minority ethnic culture was the reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping which, among other things, instituted the right to be non-Han and upheld various practices as ‘nationality habits and customs’. Thus, tradition became the privileged domain of “minority nationalities” (Gillette 2000: 323).

The Lianhu district of Xi’an is home to the majority of Xi’an’s Hui population (Hui minzu), 7 one of China’s largest minority nationalities who have resided within the historic core of the city for more than one thousand years. 8 While national minorities have become synonymous with cultural tourism in China, the role assigned to the Hui population of Xi’an is minimal in the official discourse of the city despite their long association with, for example, the Silk Road. Here we can witness a selective caution in relation to the Hui who may not fulfill the stereotypical role of “colourful attraction” (Oakes 2005: 37) so often assigned to minority nationalities in China. While an emphasis on local heritage has often been regarded as an effective means of encouraging local pride (Nilsson & Ying 2001: 3101), the renaissance plan places emphases on the reconstruction and representation of Tang dynasty heritage and culture while

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Table 1 Social costs and benefits associated with tourist precinct. Source: Hayllar, et al. (2008).
Historic environment in the context of urban regeneration: challenges and opportunities

Social dislocations wrought by urban redevelopment are a potential source of contestation and conflict between stakeholders, including the residential communities affected. There is ample evidence that “relocations” and the loss of property rights have been a significant cause of social unrest in contemporary China (Friedmann 2005). There are specific zones of conflict associated with the replication of Tang heritage in Lianhu, including direct dislocation and displacement of existing businesses and residents, and induced displacements through increased property values which are likely to be beyond the ability of low-income households. These pressures are further intensified by extreme asymmetries of power and resources among the interests involved (Hutton 2004).

The transformation of Xi’an’s historic legacy as a former national capital for domestic and international tourism consumption has not gone uncontested. The Hui community of Xi’an has demanded that any urban renewal plans leave room for them to maintain their solidarity, and some have organized to defend their community interests. Though they certainly desire to be seen as progressive, they have deep anxiety about the survival of their community life, their extended families, their mosques, and their businesses, fears which neither local nor provincial government planners have been able to allay (Lipman 2004). Cultural or political tensions between Hui Muslims and the state are by no means new and can be traced as far back as the Ming dynasty. The Hui population are present in every province of China, thus it is difficult for governing authorities to relegate disputes to the status of “regional ethnic tensions”. Although (or perhaps because) they do not occupy a defined territory within China, they have managed to acculturate while retaining a distinct identity through Islamic practice and collective memory. Many Hui take pride in their common Islamic heritage and their status as a “minority nationality” within the Chinese state. However, such views are not shared by all members of the Hui population of China and some resent what they regard as the patronizing and condescending designation of “younger brothers” in need of Hanzu leadership and civilization.

Urban renewal in Lianhu has the potential to bring numerous benefits to the local Hui community, but may also require the sacrifice of individual and community values and the social conditions which are an essential element of their community life (Lipman 2004). Displacement has often been regarded as an unavoidable by-product of urban regeneration, but increasingly communities are unwilling to pay the associated economic, social and psychological costs, which endanger the collective expression of their history, traditions, values and ways of life. The Renaissance Plan can be associated with Judd’s (1999) concept of the urban tourist bubble, a contrived and carefully managed tourist landscape, often insulated from the city’s environment and social problems. The rehabilitation plan for Xi’an points to the development of an “enclavist tourist space” (Edensor 1998: 45) which provides for the perceived needs of tourists (domestic and international) and middle class urbanites who may increasingly inhabit “renewed” space in the historic core. In this context the Renaissance Plan for the city cannot be analyzed in isolation, but must instead be viewed as a component of marketization and decentralization policies in the transition towards a socialist market economy in post-reform China.
While the reproduction and representation of heritage sites in the historic core of Xi’an may create the aesthetic sought by tourists and new urbanites, there is likely to be considerable debate on question of authenticity and the commodification of culture and space in Xi’an. The reinstatement of Tang dynasty street patterns, Tang style architecture and the renaming of streets represent a conscious attempt to impose a form of political and cultural cohesion through the manipulation of spaces of representation (Meethan 2001). Thematic standardized spaces of the “tourist bubble” may offer reassurance to the visitor who can hop on the newly constructed metro system to the confines of their hotel. However, such spaces may be of limited utility to many of the remaining residents of this historic core of Xi’an who may not share the reverence for Tang heritage apparent among the majority Han population. It has been suggested that aspects of the renaissance plan, such as the West Market, will primarily benefit developers and their associates in the name of conservation and heritage. Concerns relating to the reduction of population density and potential gentrification of inner city areas following implementation of the plan have been raised. It has been suggested that the Tang imperial city could be “neither fish nor fowl” (Zhang 2008) but simply another example of the kind of pastiches or “staged authenticity” (MacCannell 1976: 102) which is commonplace in contemporary China, more to do with the exploitation of heritage sites for tourism and recreation, rather than their preservation or conservation (Larkham 1995).

While some have argued that “gentrification represents a measure of success in the rehabilitation of historic centers” (Serageldin et al. 2001: 398), the term is often assigned negative connotations in the literature on urban development. As Zukin (1995) suggests, many of the world’s cities have witnessed a transformation from places of production to consumption, with negative consequences for minorities and the poor, with loss of low skilled jobs, gentrification of neighborhoods and loss of public space (Zukin 1995). As Zhang (2008: 34) suggests:

Housing, cars, leisure, travel and fashion are the key items of the new consumer society, and form the core sociocultural dimensions of China’s urban development from massive shopping malls, bar areas, theme parks and suburban housing estates to fantasy architectural and urban expressions.

West Market may resemble a postmodern representation of the Imperial Garden of Yuanming Yuanxii in Beijing (built from 1709 – 1774), combining entertainment and consumption in a built environment which boosted a “peopled” make-believe market town for the entertainment of the Emperor (read visitor) and his guests (Ren 2007). Similar to the function of Chinese theme parks, the New West Market can be regarded as “an institution of social engineering in the broader context of China’s social transformation” and an example of an “efficient and flexible economic system in which the production of cultural commodities, moving between economic and cultural circuits, increases the economic value of investment capital” (Zukin 1991; Ren 2007: 108). Yet urban spaces have also given rise to new forms of cultural capital, which present alternative opportunities for marginalized groups to engage with social, economic and political developments.

Discussion

Today Xi’an is confronting a diversity of influences and challenges as it seeks to balance the often competing interests of heritage preservation with that of the living city. While the Hui make claim to their status as a national “minority” within China’s fifty-six official “nationalities” and to their strong links with the historic Silk Road, the local governing authorities appeal to a vision of Xi’an as the imperial city of the Tang. Under the current renaissance plan, the contradictions of constructing the past through “hyper-traditions” or “staged authenticity” on the one hand, and the preservation of living cultural traditions of the local Hui population on the other, raise important question of cultural inheritance and the transmission of symbolic meaning as a living bridge linking history and traditions with the contemporary “lifeworld”. Accommodating these competing interests – one seeking to reconstruct and represent a landscape of nostalgia in tangible form, one seeking to articulate an intangible heritage rooted in everyday social practice – is likely to dominate efforts to sustain Xi’an as an important historic, yet culturally vibrant, city. In assessing these challenges it is important to acknowledge the need to apply Chinese criteria for determining what is historically significant in any given setting. Also, Chinese development principles may be diametrically opposed to those of Western theorists. While Western influences have begun to insight changes in the way projects are conceived, aspects of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Islam, exert a significant influence on contemporary Chinese knowledge and values.

In Xi’an, as in other Chinese cities under the triad of influences noted above, the perspectives of government officials, developers, the majority of the city’s resident population, and tourists (who are predominantly Han Chinese), are inevitably influenced by such “symbolic politics”. However, as Nilsson and Ying (2001: 292-293) note, fundamental problems with the prevailing model of planning in China means that “the priorities of experts and politicians often override those of interested individuals and special groups”, “planning focuses on results rather than the process”, implementation is “dependant on the government’s sometimes arbitrary orders and decisions”, and “only a small number of people, typically experts and government leaders, can express opinions on planning proposals”. While there are moves to strengthen China’s planning and design legislation these have “weak statutory integrity” (Jim & Liu 2000: 311) due to poor monitoring and enforcement at local level. Although the Chinese government is improving the transparency of its governance, channels of communication between government and the public are limited, mostly because of the political restrictions on the media (Su et al. 2007). Such issues are not unique to China, but in the context of contemporary Chinese urban development they are far more marked as tensions between stakeholder interests often only appear in the public arena after long periods of maturation without an effective system for early intervention and resolution. While there have been efforts to underpin the decentralization of decision making, such as the City Planning Act 1989 and the Urban and Rural Planning Act 2007, these have often led to marked conflicts of interest between stakeholders in urban development (Zhu 1999). Evidence from studies of urban development in Beijing tends to support this contention. For example, du Cros et al. (2005: 180) note that the devolution of powers to district councils have resulted in
development approvals being granted without the necessary impact assessments being undertaken and that "local communities have little power over or involvement in these planning decisions".

Conclusion

Xi’an is enmeshed in an increasingly intense struggle for position in the pecking order of global heritage cities in which the differentiating power of history is invoked. Like numerous cities across the globe, Xi’an has witnessed new forms of decentralisation and deregulation as provincial and municipal government embrace neo-liberal vocabularies in the symbolic ‘performance of regeneration’. Many of the regeneration templates, which have so strongly influenced Chinese city planners, including those of Xi’an, are premised on the commodification of space through a convergence of interests associated with the cultural industries, real estate and tourism. However, this new found liberation in local or regional structures of governance is increasingly constrained by the attendant fragmentation of responsibilities, diminishing recourse to resources, and an increasingly competitive experience economy all of which delimit development options and demand informed responses. In developing such responses, stakeholders will require integrative research outcomes which transcend the fragmented nature of extant literature on China’s post-reform urbanisation. Meanwhile, as these processes evolve, the future of historic Xi’an may lie less in the hands of bureaucratic structures of governance than in the hands of urban middle class (Zhongchan) consumers who have begun to inhabit the ‘cultural quarters’ of Chinese cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Guangzhou. The lifestyles and tastes of these footloose bohemian urbanites who interact with other city users, including tourists, to reconfigure space in this historic city are likely to be the ultimate drivers of Xi’an’s future role as one of China’s most important historic cities.

The Renaissance plan, which systematically exploits local culture, built systems and landscape, can serve to showcase aspects of the city’s imperial past to the local populations (old and new), as well as to domestic and international tourists. In doing so the evolving regeneration plan certainly provides an opportunity for the transformation of cultural resources through the emergence of contemporary Chinese citizens as desiring free-spending consumers – an increasingly common marker of contemporary urban Chinese identity. The historic core of Xi’an may represent a collective memory of imperial splendour for many Han Chinese, but in Lianhu this may not be shared by the remaining Hui population who are likely to draw on alternative interpretations of the past to inform their future. In this regard, the question shifts from a focus on the future of historic Xi’an, to the shifting meanings of inheritance, as the dynamic between global and local forces are played out in China’s century.

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End Notes

1 The Han dynasty saw the expansion of trading routes to the west, which would, during the Tang dynasty, facilitate even greater economic and cultural interaction between China and the outside world. Echoes of the Han dynasty resonate throughout Chinese culture in everyday communication through Hanzi (Chinese characters) and Hanlu (Chinese spoken language of the ethnic majority), the names given to Chinese writing system, and Hanfu, the description of the ethnic majority of China.

2 Today, numerous members of Chinese communities around the world and millions of non-Chinese either visit or reside in Tangrenjie (literally, Tang people street), more commonly known to English speaking peoples as "China Town".

3 Xi’an City Government, Xi’an City Overall Plan1990-2000, p.22.

4 It is important to note that under the Maoist regime optimum industrial growth took precedent over both agriculture and urban consumption (see Chan 1992; Lin 2002).

5 The exaggeration of old practices and images and, when deemed necessary, even the invention of new traditions (King 2007).

6 Cultural and social practices of the local Hui population are an important consideration in any assessment of the use of public space in the district.

7 From the 15th to the 20th century, Hui (or of the earlier Huhu) was simply the Chinese word for Muslim (Lipman 2004).

8 Apart from their religious practice, we can find a great diversity among the Hui population of China (see Lipman 2004).

9 Islam no longer touches all Hui as many have become secularists, atheists, or members of the Communist Party and thus, have separated themselves to some extent from the religious life of their communities (Lipman 2004).

10 Historically the Hui population of Xi’an lived in single story "level houses" (Ping Fang) built of white washed mud and straw and arranged in a rectangle with a central courtyard which was shared by the occupants, usually blood relatives.

11 As discussed elsewhere, Feighery (2008) noted the cultural and spatial practices of many of the local Hui population, who make up a significant proportion of the population in inner-city Xi’an, and the likely reluctance of these residents to utilize public space in and around historic monuments and or public gardens in the city.

12 Whereas theme parks are often viewed as a recent phenomenon, in China the theme park as a cultural form has a long history. The imperial garden of Yuanming Yuan (built from 1709 – 1774) may be viewed as a prototype of the modern theme park (Plen 2007:99).