



Learning about Urban Development in China: A Collage of Narratives

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Abstract: This paper presents a collage of personal narratives derived from travel diaries documented over the past twenty-five years of professional engagement in China. Stemming from diverse activities—ranging from academic teaching and keynote presentations to cooperation in urban development projects and study tours - these narratives offer a perspective on the country's urbanization processes. While basing on extensive literature on Chinese history and governance, the study acknowledges the inherent complexity of fully grasping the local context from an external viewpoint. Consequently, rather than offering a systematic theoretical analysis, the author provides a qualitative reflection on the evolving urban planning culture in China, illustrating specific case studies of development and transformation observed through personal experience.

Keywords: urban development; China; urban planning; narratives; case studies.

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1. Introduction

The contributions to this paper are fruits from a rich basket, a collage of personal narratives noted in the author's travel diaries. They document visits to China throughout the last 25 years. The reasons to travel to China were invitations to teach at Chinese universities, occasions of giving keynote presentations at conferences in the country, requests to cooperate in urban development projects, or participation in study tours organized by Chinese hosts. All these opportunities have forced me to read

about China, about its history, and its urbanization processes.

However, the more I had read about China, when preparing my visits and lectures, the more I felt that my superficial knowledge of the country was more and more declining. The fact that I never had the commitment and discipline to learn Chinese is certainly one explanation. In addition, I never felt encouraged to become a specialist on urban and regional development in China, or even a sinologist. The quantity of English books on urban planning in China, even on China history, culture and governance exceeded my absorptive capacity.

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2. Methodology

The paper is not based on the outcome of traditional research projects and does not aim to add new insights into the theory of spatial planning in China. The narratives in this paper are much less ambitious. They just reflect my impressions made as a planner at different places in China over a time span of 25 years. It uses narratives as a tool to describe personal experience when working at different places in China and visiting cities in China. In times of data-mania, of overload of quantitative data and extensive GIS mapping, the essence of arguments is often lost. Narratives refer to the account of events over time. They refine messages and help readers of the planning community to better understand the context and the challenge of a planning project or a process. Narratives deliberately simplify complex information and make it more appealing and understandable to a wider audience. Narratives in spatial planning are used to convince politicians, decision-makers or citizen groups to start a planning process, to accept a project, to select an alternative, or approve a policy for guiding spatial development. These narratives reflect a personal experience of the urban planning culture in China, offering a perspective on the rapid transformation of Chinese cities through the lens of a Western planning practitioner and academic.

3. Perspectives of Urban Development in China

The following narratives present impressions made during work and visits in various Chinese cities, illustrating different facets of urban development, regeneration, and planning practices.

3.1. Haikou: A Vision for Nandu River

In 2004, a Dortmund PhD student from Haikou wishing to respond to a global call for proposals, and to participate in the competition for town expansion in his home town was searching for an international partner. He asked me whether I would like to give it a try. My answer was positive. I was curious to learn more about such competitions in China and invited two academic planners of Berlin to join the adventurous project. The terms for the competition for the extension of the city of Haikou aimed to develop a concept for adding housing for another 250,000 people and around 50,000 jobs. In the 7,700-hectare large planning area, over 100,000 apartments, hotels, a marina and various leisure facilities for Chinese vacationers, a new government district for the provincial government, a shopping center, an international exhibition center as well as a university and a technology center, were to be planned.

Haikou (Chinese 海口市) is the most populous Chinese city on the tropical island of Hainan, situated by the mouth of the Nandu River, a sensitive wetland area east of the city. In 2004, Haikou had a population of 1.6 million, and in 2025, more than 2 million.

Originating from the Han Dynasty and established as a port at the end of the Song Dynasty, Haikou has a history dating back over nine hundred years. Hainan Island is one of China's rapidly growing special economic zones (Brødsgaard 2009). During the Chinese Civil war, Haikou was one of the last Nationalist strongholds to be taken by the Communists with the Battle of Hainan Island in 1950. Throughout history, Haikou has been known as the "Water City". The old town of the city contains a small number of the old buildings and shady

arcades in Portuguese, French and Southeast Asian styles that returnees from overseas had built. Today, Hainan, known as the Hawaii of China, is an attractive destination for investors looking to build second homes for China's rapidly growing middle class.

Without any substantial preparation for the place, I travelled to Haikou and jumped into the project to work without any knowledge of the sensitive ecological conditions of the area for two weeks in an

empty apartment near our hotel, which the Chinese colleague had rented.

In the final report "Riverside of Nandu River", the Chinese planners used our rough sketches of a functional division of land use and our infrastructural recommendations to design an impressive concept for a new urban district on both sides of the river, hardly taking care of the sensitive ecological conditions of the area. They knew how to impress local politicians (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Nandu River Development concept



(Personal archive)

In the report the Chinese planners wrote:

"Land use is the basic condition for riverside of Nandu River development. One of the constraints of development is land ownership which is scattered over the area. Integrated use of land is the task of the Haikou Authority, but a guideline with a good plan and urban design will make the work easy. The recommended pattern for land use is that land should be under

government control and be developed in scale...The reasons for such suggestions are: 1. raise the price of land in general; 2. compensation for public use of land is from the increased land price. This model will enable public sectors to control land development fund. Also, it will enable riverside development along the line with a sustainable development strategy, and not be affected by developers....."

In discussions with the Chinese planners, we expressed our concern about the appalling stage of the old city centre, but in a meeting with the mayor of Haikou, the concern did not find much acknowledgement. Though the Chinese planners added a passage to the report suggesting replicating the old town and build a "Cultural business street of Hainan style 海南风情文化商业街":

"The old streets of hundreds years history in old Haikou impresses on the team deeply... This kind of street is a good place for tourists lingering in Europe, but this block is in bad condition in terms of environment for different kinds of causes and it collects the memory of Haikou. It is suggested that historical block setting in the east riverside be not rebuilt on the old one in spite of similar style with old city. This street will be a street with coffee rooms, bars and entertainment businesses, people lie fallow, shop and entertain or just stay here! ".

A decade later, I learnt that various projects are under discussion to decide the best way to restore and preserve these historical buildings. I also learnt that Haikou has joined the Wetland City network, which presents the city as follows:

"The city's development is intricately tied to its wetlands and water systems...Haikou's commitment to ecological civilization has received international recognition, culminating in its designation as one of the eighteen international wetland cities. This recognition has raised the city's global standing. Since then, innovative approaches to wetland protection education have been developed. A wetland-focused protection project engaged over 13 million users...and encouraged public participation in wetland protection and restoration. Various educational venues, such as the mangrove

museum, and wetland schools were established, along with the formation of a volunteer service team and wetland protection volunteer service stations. China's celebration of the 2019 World Wetland Day in Haikou, have further promoted wetland conservation efforts! (Wetland City Network n.d.).

The project of the Chinese-German team won the second prize. Four applicants were selected from the global call for proposals in July 2004. After a long political debate, the first prize went to a team of architects from Chicago. The mayor of Haikou had favored the German-Chinese team, but the governor of the island preferred the concept of the American-Chinese team. Later, I had heard that the governor had decided to shift the proposed town extension to the western side of Haikou. Considering the importance of the wetlands on the Eastern side of the city, this has been a wise decision.

Hundreds of such competitions have prepared the grounds for the economically driven urbanization policy of China. They have given work to many Chinese and international architects, landscape architects, planners and engineers, who profited from the policy.

The car-dominated design of all the new urban development projects, which were implemented over the last twenty years, shapes the international image of modern Chinese cities and canonize the living styles and mobility modes of its citizens (Duan and Liu 2022).

3.2. Changchun: Knowledge City

In 2014, through a personal network, I had been invited by the local Institute of Urban Planning and Design (CIUPD) to come to Changchun with no clear assignment (Kunzmann 2017b). The institute, an advisory public institute

established by the local government offers advisory services to the city and urban governments in the province, serves as a counterpart to foreign consultants who are asked by the city or by the provincial or the central government to advice on development planning projects, and is treated as a think tank to provide information and data for local planning and decision-making processes. The projects the institute usually carried out at that time period were traditional design projects for town expansion and urban renewal in the province of Jilin. Strategic urban development has not been a subject that the institute has worked on before. Half of the 250 staff working in the institute, located in an industrial quarter outside the inner city, are planners, who have been trained at schools of architecture, civil engineering and geography in China. Some senior staff received training overseas. Most staff could not communicate in English.

My assignment started rather openly. It was not linked to a particular project. When asked, on what kind of a project I would like to work, I had suggested to develop a strategy to guide future urban development of the city based on knowledge development, not as a city marketing project, but as a pilot exercise in strategic urban development planning. The importance of knowledge development had been my main interest at that time period (Kunzmann 2004a, 2008, 2009). My proposal had been accepted, and once the decision was made, I frequently travelled to China to work on the ambitious project. The challenges I was facing were enormous. How to start such a project? How to come from a vague conceptual idea to knowledge? How then to come from knowledge to action in an environment, which is characterized by a different planning culture, focused on physical planning and urban design? The

strategic concept in my mind was that of a knowledge city, a city where future local economic, social and cultural development is based on the advancement of knowledge. Admittedly, the knowledge city concept is rather fuzzy. It is a kind of a plug-in concept for guiding city development in times of globalization and rapid technological change. The knowledge city strategy combines pro-active physical development with economic, social and cultural economic development. It addresses local structural change and aims to lay sustainable and resilient foundations for an innovative, future-oriented and competitive local economy; it promotes local research and education, higher education as well as professional education; it supports such strategies and policies by the creation of open cultural milieus and related infrastructure. It is a comprehensive policy with a strong economic dimension, which however, can only succeed in cities, where creating and sustaining a high degree of liveability is high on the political agenda. But how to prepare, how to commence this ambitious journey?

Changchun, located in the northeast of China, has a traditional industrial profile. It is not economically thriving, though it is the location of China's high-speed railway industry and one of the more important locations of automotive industries in the country (In a joint venture FAW Volkswagen/Audi are producing around 400,000 cars annually). The official number of people living in the urban area of Changchun is around 4 million, and 8 million within the wider functional urban city region.

To study the city, I suggested beginning with a series of intensive interviews with key local, public and private knowledge stakeholders. Apart from learning about the city, the rationale of these interviews was to

start establishing a communication platform, which could serve in the future as a horizontal network of communication for local knowledge actors. At other occasions I had learned that communication processes in China are always vertical and top-down, rarely horizontal. The stakeholders I had suggested interviewing were, among others, the Office of the Mayor, the local Planning and Reform Commission, the local Planning Bureau, the International Bureau of the city, a local social welfare institution, a local elite university, a vocational training centre, a local science park, the management of the railway corporation, the FAW automobile factory, the local movie industry, a local newspaper, and local entrepreneurs and representatives of the business community. For each interview, I had prepared a set of questions targeted to the respective stakeholder, which I asked to translate into Chinese and send out ahead of the interviews together with a description of the aims and the selected outcome of the project. This intensive interview approach, which is routine in my country, has been quite unusual for the working culture of the institute. I had to explain that the purpose of such interviews was not to collect data and factual information, a task that I wanted to leave to the local staff at a later stage. I had argued that I would rather like to hear views and opinions about present and future urban challenges in the city, learn about local plans and strategies in the eyes of the interview partners and explore their expectations from the project. Later I realized that the staff of the institute for whatsoever reason had not translated some of the more qualitative questions.

My personal outcome was extremely enlightening. The interviews confirmed much of what I had experienced at earlier occasions, what I had learnt from conversations with Chinese academic

planners, from reading selected articles and books on Chinese urban development and planning, and from screening more or less regularly *China Daily*, the politically cleaned newspaper for expatriates and foreign visitors of China. The interviews verified the prevalent top-down culture in planning and decision-making in the country. Urban development is driven by top-down policies. When asking about local policies and strategies, reference was always made to central or at least provincial government policies. It soon became apparent that government policies, on innovation and economic development related to knowledge development, and their implications for local implementation, were not discussed with other stakeholders at the city level and not in a broader context. Strategic alliances were not openly initiated. Local platforms of communication have not been established. The city is an archipelago of gated spheres of influence, like gated communities, self-centered with few corridors and bridges in between. Challenges at the local level were openly expressed, such as the low attractiveness of the city for qualified labor, the relative lack of quality of life, entertainment opportunities, the absence of cultural and life style milieus, and traffic congestion problems of course. The expectations, however, were rather fuzzy. As a rule, Beijing and Shanghai or even Singapore, served as reference cities. Benchmarking with more thriving second tier cities in China has not been expressed. The strong inward-looking spirit of the local society and the lack of a more international orientation were openly articulated.

During most interviews made, one dimension of local development has never remained unspoken: the importance of land as a means of income for local development. The availability of land, the access to land,

and the use of land are the key determinants guiding city development and management. Any other strategic perspective is subordinated to the land concern. Not

surprisingly, local knowledge development in turn remained an abstract concept, not linked to urban development.

Figure 2: Changchun, hidden behind local barriers



(Photo of the author)

The interviews conducted gave me a valuable insight into the spirit and values of stakeholders in the city, who are part of the local knowledge development environment (Figure 2). This reminded me on my experience of working in another old industrial region, the Ruhr in Germany, where inward-looking attitudes have been one of the reasons why the transformation process in the economically stagnating region, did not develop and hindered implementing strategies to manage its structural transformation.

The project ended when the director and cooperating planners left the institute. No initiative was taken to continue the work. Nobody seemed to have an interest in convincing the city to follow up the proposal.

3.3. Jimo: Urban Regeneration, the Chinese Manner

Jimو is a city in the wider administrative territory of Qingdao with a population of just 1.3 million. It is considered to be one of the most affluent middle-sized cities in China. Its local economy is based on 'blue', ocean-related industries. There a most unusual project has been implemented. With the exception of two small houses from the 1930s, the run-down old city quarter with a typical rectangular Chinese layout has been demolished. It has been replaced by a totally new Chinese town but in old style, with a boutique hotel, a Chinese garden, a museum, numerous shops, a large number of villas in Chinese style and attractive public spaces. The villas were available for lease as main or second-home residences. A huge wall with four gates surrounds the whole new

urban quarter. Underground parking provides parking space for future residents, shop owners, visitors and tourists. The residents, formerly living in the old centre, were compensated by apartments in high-rise buildings surrounding the old city. When looking down from their windows to the new Chinese Disneyland, they can recall old memories of their daily life in the old

quarter. (Figures 3a and 3b). During the second visit to Jimo in 2025, I learnt that the renowned Chinese pianist Lang Lang, has bought one of the newly built houses as a private residence and as a home for a local music academy. Though there are still newly built houses for sale for a price of around 1 million USD.

Figure 3a and 3b: Jimo regeneration



(Photo of the author and personal archive)

3.4. Anting: the Clone of a German Town

In 2001, under the slogan “One City, Nine Towns” the city government of Shanghai presented a masterplan for its metropolitan area. The plan suggested the development of a number of new towns to provide urgently needed housing for its growing population. Architects from Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Canada and Germany were asked to design attractive concepts for a new town, reflecting the urban traditions of their countries. Cloning European townscapes was a fashion during these days to promote national tourism (Hassenpflug 2009). None of the cities were solely designed by Chinese architects. One of the sites selected in the region was Anting, the location of the German Chinese Shanghai Volkswagen Joint Venture

automobile manufacturing plant, 34 kilometers away from the city centre of Shanghai. Asking a prominent German architect and urban planner, expectations were that he would plan a clone of a traditional German town, a town like Rothenburg-ob-der Tauber, Nördlingen or Tübingen.

Albert Speer, professor of city planning at the University of Kaiserslautern in Germany, founder and CEO of a renowned German consultancy, and son of Albert Speer (who had served Adolf Hitler to implement the dictator's dream to make Germany great again), had been asked by Volkswagen China to plan Anting New Town (Chinese: 安亭新镇), a suburban town for about 25,000 people. The first phase of the town project was built between

2007 and 2012, though the construction was not really synchronized with infrastructure development (Figures 4a, 4b, and 4c). The German architects of "Anting New Town" designed a cityscape similar in character and style to a German town on an area of approximately 1.6 sq. km, with five-floor city blocks along the central streets, residential blocks of three to four floors, and even townhouses on the edge. A central square with a German sculpture and various neighborhood squares and parks provided public spaces. By extending existing canals within the urban fabric, it was possible to achieve an exceptional quality. All houses followed German building and ecological standards. Though disappointment was great when the first sections of the town were finished, Albert Speer had designed a German town following social values and German legal regulations, not the copy of a romantic Middle Ages town.

It took some time until the newly built apartments found buyers, and for some time German and British media branded the project gleefully as a ghost town. The

coordination of measures to synchronize the development had been inadequate. In 2024, only 7,000 people had moved to the town. The design was not the problem, but the lack of public infrastructure, mainly schools and kindergartens, and the long absence of nearby shops for food and household demands. In addition, the price of the apartments was too high. As late as 2012, the Shanghai city government provided the necessary funds to expand the infrastructure, and only in late 2014 was the Shanghai subway extended to Anting.

More than two decades later the initial problems have been solved and the prices for apartments in Central Shanghai have raised enormously. Hence Anting has become an alternative for households sympathizing with the German design. I wonder how people living in Anting are feeling: Are they content and happy or just feel that they have been used as guinea pigs for Chinese-European planners transferring concepts from one planning culture to another one (Kunzmann 2017a)?

Figure 4 a, b, and c: Anting



(Photos of the author and personal archive)

3.5. Pingquan: A Tale of Transformation

In 2017, following a private invitation of the local government supervisor, I went by high speed train to Pingquan (Chinese: 平泉; pinyin: *Píngquán*), a "small" town 300 km northeast of Beijing, the home town

of 470,000 people, and a stop on the high-speed train from Beijing to Shenyang. The small town is a centre of trade and commerce. Gold and silver are mined nearby. The local agriculture is largely specialized (mushrooms, almonds and sunflowers) and industrialized. No temples

are attracting pilgrims or curious tourists. Neither an impressive historical townscape nor beautiful rural scenery give the town a particular local identity. A "river" meandering through the town had no water but did have nicely designed and equipped river promenades. During the short ride from the railway station to the modern hotel I learnt, that I had arrived in a well-planned modern town. Though that was only half of the story. Ambitious urban development has already divided the town. Half of the town with its dilapidated buildings had been demolished to make place for modern high-rise residential buildings, up to 19 floors. The other half, I had been told, while visiting the local town planning museum, would be developed likewise. The fact that such a "small" town has a town planning museum in the city hall was a surprise. It proved that real estate based urban development does have much political support. Having been asked to report about small towns in Germany, I felt that the presentation on German planning culture in small towns, which I had prepared, would not really impress the small local audience. Instead I improvised and talked about the reasons why the transfer of the practiced planning culture, like the one practiced in Germany, can hardly be transferred to China. To demonstrate the economic vitality of the small town, a sightseeing tour brought me to a mushroom factory, with huge blackened glass houses, a factory processing and extracting almonds and sunflower kernels and a factory producing Chinese wine, where customers could learn more about wine processing and buy huge personally labelled stone vases filled with Chinese wine.

While staying in Pingquan, nobody told me about a dark chapter of the local history of the place. Later I learnt from the web that Pingquan was formerly called Bakou.

During the Jindandao Incident of 1891, a rebellion of Han Chinese, Pingquan was assaulted by Chinese religious sects. At that occasion the catholic church of the town was burnt and numerous Chinese converts were massacred.

3.6. Qingdao: A New Vision for Liuting Airport

During a brief visit to Qingdao in 2018 I had been invited by a commission of the city of Qingdao to join a meeting that discussed the future of the old Liuting Qingdao airport area. A new airport at another site of the city was under construction and almost finished. "What to do with the old airport area?" had been the agenda of the meeting. A concept was on the desk, though lacking Chinese language competence I could not actively participate in the discussion, but was asked to provide a written comment on the concept from a German perspective. In my memory the concept for the area, where 96,000 citizens lived and worked, suggested, what city governments in China were told by the central government: Make utmost use of the land, and demolish what is necessary to raise the GDP of the city, and invite real estate developers to present their ideas. My careful comments on the concept plan for the airport area were different. They were among others:

Local political, economic, social and ecological developments that cannot yet be anticipated in 2018, may change in the years ahead. The closing of the airport will relieve the residents from noise and pollution. It will offer new chances for innovative, future high-quality urban development. Such chances should not be thrown away by sticking to a concept, which may already be outdated a few years after the closing of the airport.

The Liuting airport area is not an island. It is embedded in a local as well as a wider functional context. This has considerable implications for infrastructure development and future land use. Much of the logistics functions around the airport will move to the new airport. This has consequences for future infrastructure development and land use.

For social, environmental and wider economic reasons, modernizing the existing building stock (In German called: "Erneuerung im Bestand") should be prioritized. Experience in Germany shows, that conceptualizing and implementing this approach, however, requires an appropriate institutional setting in the city. It may require establishing a new special innovative department to better coordinate the management of the transformation process together with existing authorities. It could give the district a particular identity. The vision could be environment-oriented and linked to the ambitions of the Qingdao Sino-German Eco-Park.

The airport terminal building should not be demolished. It could be used for a variety of multi-functional purposes (culture, entertainment, shopping, and museum). To explore such uses, brainstorming sessions with representatives of the public sector, with the cultural community in Qingdao, as well as with local and regional developers in the entertainment and fashion industry have to be organized.

The re-use of such a huge building complex, as is the international terminal, requires a long and creative process involving many institutions, users, and decision-makers to explore its multi-functional potential for the future (e.g. cultural facilities, airport museum, entertainment, exhibition spaces, outlet shopping, etc.). It would make sense to develop alternative scenarios, exploring

different alternatives concerning possible futures of the airport and its surrounding urban quarters. The future use of the terminal building will have a considerable impact on economic activities immediately outside the terminal building and should always be linked to the functions in the terminal.

In order to raise the quality of life, the whole planning area should be structured by clearly visible sub-districts with mixed functions (housing, jobs, shops, leisure grounds) with a clear internal pedestrian system, which makes the use of automobiles for daily purposes superfluous. Existing roads could be pedestrianized or turned into parking lots, or even just used public spaces for citizen health exercises. The sub-districts could be interlinked by a ring-shaped public transport system linking the district to the metro system of Qingdao.

A huge cluster of logistic enterprises characterizes the Liuting Airport Area. Many residents in the area are working in this segment of the local economy. With the new airport, the airport-related logistic enterprises will gradually transfer their services and abandon storage structures. Some of their employees will have to commute to the new airport. Others will have to find new jobs in the area. This requires a new concept for non-airport-related logistics to benefit from the competence and experience for those employees, who wish to remain in the area.

Linked to other economic developments in the Liuting Airport Area, knowledge institutions (e.g. professional colleges, vocational training centres, campuses of Qingdao universities) could find appropriate sites in the area.

The transfer of the logistic cluster is a good chance to provide new affordable ephemeral or permanent spaces for a wide variety of creative industries, for artists and

creative entrepreneurs (design, video, film, music), as well as for start-ups in the evolving digital economy and related private services. This, in turn, could give a new creative identity to selected sites in the area. It could also be linked to the new functions of the terminal building. A small agency communicating with the community of artists and creative industries and moderating the use of space with landowners could manage the transformation process.

The proposed green park is a key element of the district. However, for ecological and health reasons and to allow easy access for local residents and people employed in local offices, workshops, and shopping areas, all green open spaces should be interlinked, to allow easy walking, jogging and cycling, uninterrupted and undisturbed by automobile traffic. Green spaces along highways and busy roads are certainly necessary, though they cannot replace green open spaces for local residents.

Two rivers define the boundaries of the Liuting Airport Area. The waterfronts along these two rivers require particular attention and careful urban design. They can be used as key elements of the efforts to create a new identity for the whole area.

I do not know whether my comments had any impact. During recent visits to Qingdao, I never got any feedback (Kunzmann and Zhan 2019; Kunzmann 2019a).

3.7. XuYi: Calligraphy Town

Xuyi, the self-branded crayfish capital of China, three hours north of Nanjing in Jiangsu Province, is one of China's early urban cities with a history spanning more than 900 years. A change in the course of the Yellow River, buried by floods 300

years ago, washed away the important ancient port city and transportation hub on Hongze Lake, formerly known as Sizhou. Historians and archaeologists call the site the Pompeii of China. A comprehensive plan is underway to excavate the town for research and to promote tourism. Xuyi, meaning "to open one's eyes wide and look straight ahead" in ancient Chinese, is known as a tourist destination primarily because of the Mingzhuling, the ancestral cemetery of the royal family of the Ming Dynasty. It is the cemetery where the first and founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty buried his grandfather and ancestors. The cemetery was flooded by the Yellow River in 1680. It was rediscovered in 1963 and is now under national protection.

The Institute of Urban Planning at the Southeast University of Nanjing arranged my visit to the city. On behalf of the local government, the institute had been asked to work on a regeneration strategy for one of Xuyi's urban villages. The purpose of my visit was to make suggestions for regeneration. Upon arrival, I learned that most of the residents of the urban village district had already been compensated and vacated their homes. The first phase of regeneration, the Chinese way, was almost complete. People had moved out, though demolition had not yet begun. What should I recommend?

The goal of the project was to find a new, economically viable use for the village's remaining structures. The nearby First Mountain Confucian Temple and a picturesque mountain park with numerous calligraphic sites behind the village inspired me to propose the gradual development of a calligraphy village, following the national policy of preserving local architecture and promoting the sustainable development of handicrafts and creative industries. This could have been achieved by:

- i. Inviting Chinese poets to give one-week poetry lessons/classes to visitors from the Yangtze River Delta.
- ii. Inviting Chinese calligraphy artists to work in a converted village studio (based on a generous grant from the local government) and live in converted residential buildings.
- iii. Asking them to give one-week calligraphy lessons/classes to visitors from the Yangtze River Delta.
- iv. Inviting calligraphy cutters and artisans to open workshops in the village specializing in copying ancient calligraphy stones from the First Mountain and teaching calligraphic rubbing of ancient calligraphy stones.
- v. Encouraging the renowned Avant-Garde Library (bookstore) in Nanjing to open a calligraphy and pottery bookstore in the village and to arrange regular poetry readings at a poetry center in the village.
- vi. Launching an initiative to build a smart calligraphy platform connecting the village with other sites, research centers, and calligraphy museums in China and beyond.
- vii. Finally, promoting the formation of a "Friends of the Calligraphy Village" corporation and inviting prominent citizens of the province to participate in and support calligraphy and poetry activities in the village.

All of this should be viewed as a development process and complemented by a small village heritage museum, which will showcase the impact of the Cultural Revolution on the province's calligraphy heritage, a research center, catering services, and guesthouses. I also suggested discussing regeneration with people in other villages in the city prior to planning and demolition. Not surprisingly, given the demolition already having been done, these proposals did not meet local expectations.

Consequently, they were shelved without further discussion.

3.8. Zhaoquanying: Two Green Dragons Forgotten

Realizing the huge development potential of his town, an ambitious local party secretary of Zhaoquanying, had asked a Chinese group of environmentalists doing research on sustainable development at the University of Applied Sciences in Trier to help him to mobilize that potential. He aimed to benefit from the town's location in the Shunyi District near Beijing Capital International Airport (PEK) and the Zhongguancun Dongsheng Science and Technology Park, the largest Chinese research cluster in the north of Beijing. Around 30,000 people live and 19,000 work in the suburban town of 24 rural villages. Like in most urban agglomerations the ongoing suburban transformation from a rural to an urban society has resulted in unintended urban sprawl and transportation challenges. In addition, unless benefiting from historical development, most suburban communities in China (even in many European countries) are lacking a local identity, which has become so important in times of images and local narratives.

Learning from my linkages to China, the small Chinese group in the environmental campus had asked me to help work on a concept, which would meet the expectations of the party secretary and follow the aims of the Beijing master plan of 2017 and the county development plan of 2006. The role of the district was to become "*a core area of the aviation center that integrates city and airport, a pioneer zone of upgraded economic development driven by innovation, a pilot area that demonstrates coordinated urban-rural development*".

Given the advantageous suburban location, the assignment looked like an easy one. A site visit to the place, however, revealed that the place, which evolved around a linear village along a secondary road, was not impressive. Zhaoquanying was neither gifted with a scenic townscape with architectural heritage, nor surrounded by a beautiful rural landscape. The place had no local identity. A branch of the Peking University hospital, a production site of BAIC Automotive, a company producing off-road vehicles, diesel vehicles, new energy vehicles, modified vehicles, and other vehicles, the nearby science park Heping, and the Government's promise that one day the metro lines 15 or 17 from Beijing will have a stop in Zhaoquanying, were the only assets of the suburban town. Taxpayers in the city are the automotive industry (45%), the real estate businesses (27%) and environmental industries, including a Chinese production outlet of a Dortmund corporation producing water pumps (8%). Four types of housing are available for its citizens, traditional housing in villages, housing provided by private developers at high costs, social housing built by public sector, and high-rise resettlement buildings for residents of local villages, who were encouraged to leave their villages to make place for new investments. Electricity, water, and telecommunication are well supplied, but the lack of wastewater treatment was a big challenge. Only 27% of the town was linked to a local wastewater system, and most rivers in the regions were polluted.

Hence, it was just its location, which makes the town a favorite investment hub in the suburb of the 20-million capital city. The fact that the whole Shunyi district is promoted by policies of the Central and Beijing governments was certainly another asset for potential investors. Following the

recommendations of the Shunyi development plan, the strategy for Zhaoquanying should offer "*a pilot plan for a new type of urbanization*" in the larger urban region and *attract technologically innovative and culturally creative industries relying on the Airport Industrial Zone*". When presenting the interim report, and pointing to the challenges, development principles and potential directions of local development, the mayor showed neither much interest in the outcome of the survey nor wished to discuss the aims which he had in mind for his town. Public participation has not been a concern.

The well-worded comprehensive final report in Chinese and English (Zhaoquanying Government and Trier University of Applied Sciences 2018), under the motto and promise "*A people-centered development approach vision of innovative, green and open development*" suggested what planners recommend these days that Zhaoquanying should become "*A demonstration town where future oriented and innovative industries are located, working and living is balanced and the eco-environment is green, urban and rural development is integrated*". Obviously, reacting to local findings, improving the quality of environment has been a key recommendation. To get the support of local residents a slogan for a spatial vision was suggested "*One boulevard, two green dragons, for rivers and six beautiful villages*". Suggestions were to turn the main road crossing the town into an urban boulevard with comfortable sidewalks, bicycle lanes, and a lane for electric buses, to develop two town-wide green parklands ("two green dragons") and re-naturalize the four rivers in the context of an ecological network, take care of the design of a functionally mixed urban center, and cope with urban sprawl by guiding rural

development into "six beautiful villages", thereby following the rural vitalization strategy of the Central Government. Particular strategies were suggested for local economic development (automotive, environment, health and IT services), for modernizing the remaining agricultural production in the town and to raise the income of the peasants by forming cooperatives. Other strategies were a sustainable traffic strategy, a policy to provide more affordable housing, and a strategy to improve the technical infrastructure. Following mainstream paradigms, sustainability and the concept of a circular economy were expressed as main concerns, when guiding local development efforts. A section of the study report covered issues of land management that are crucial in China without touching sensitive political controversies. A final chapter made suggestions for implementation periods until 2050.

I assume that very few people in the local government took notice of the final report as day-to-day business dominated their work. Most probably, the concept did not provide sufficient arguments for opening-up virgin land for real estate development. Moreover, the party secretary, having been promoted to another place, seems to have lost interest in the project. Anyway, communication with Zhaoquanying ended. Nevertheless, maybe some of the sustainable ideas and recommendations made in the report will be remembered in the future.

3.9. Zhangjiagang: Moving a Steelworks to China

In 2001, the steelworks of Thyssen-Krupp in Dortmund, founded in 1852, was closed and bought by Shagang, a private Chinese corporation. In 2002, under the command of an Austrian company, the furnace was dismantled piece by piece by

more than 1000 Chinese workers and transported by ship and rail to Zhangjiagang, a medium-sized modern city with a population of around 800,000, 200 km away from Nanjing and 80 km from Shanghai. There the steelworks was reassembled in 2004. Shagang is one of the world's biggest steel producer and one of the biggest corporations in China in private hands. Understandingly the steel workers in Dortmund protested against the closure of the steelworks, though the closure was final. Steel prices in Germany could no longer compete with the price of Chinese steel. Though the steelworker union could achieve one success: during the hard dismantling work the Chinese workers were given a free Sunday.

When visiting the site in China in 2010 I realized that the steelworks in Zhangjiagang did not look much different from its original site in Dortmund. On the occasion of two exhibition in Dortmund, the Chinese photographer Wang Fang showed her impressions of the translocation project. She reported that during the vernissage she particularly enjoyed meeting and talking to the retired steelworkers from Dortmund. They were amazed to recognize their former work places on the photos of the steelwork in China. More amazing is, what happened in Dortmund, after the steelworks had been translocated. Under the aegis of the young mayor of Dortmund, a graduate from the Dortmund School of Spatial Planning, the site was cleaned from polluted soil and flooded, resulting in a new artificial lake, which is surrounded by villas and a few social housing neighborhoods. This ambitious project totally changed the image of the urban district (Nellen et al. 2016). A former working-class district had been transformed into a modern urban district, a project, which is extremely unusual for the industrial region dominated by interests of

coal and steel industries (Figures 5a, 5b and 5c). Chinese entrepreneurial initiative had

made the transformation location possible.

Figures 5a, b and c: Phoenix Site in Dortmund



(Archive of the author)

3.10. Jiangsu: Dreaming a Future

Students in China are used to listening what teachers tell them. By Chinese tradition they respect their teachers and are eager to benefit from their experience and knowledge even wisdom. Doing exactly what teachers tell them to do is, as a rule, their practice. Learning by heart is a tradition instilled in kids the primary school. Having a different opinion than a teacher, or even openly criticizing him or her, is a taboo. This makes it difficult for foreign academic guests at Chinese universities to encourage students to discuss and to exchange views in seminars and studios. This has been my experience when addressing students at Chinese (and also at Japanese) universities. Such traditions, not language barriers, have always blocked my communication with Chinese students.

In 2024, on the occasion of a course at the School of Architecture of Nanjing Southeast University (it was one of the high-ranking schools of architecture in China), 16 master students studying planning participated in a two-week scenario writing course. At the end of the course, the students had to write scenarios on possible future development of Yancheng, a sub region of Jiangsu province with a long coastline to the Yellow Sea. The sub region is known for its sea salt production ("salt farms"). It is a

lagging region, highly endangered by global warming and not as well accessible. Young people are migrating out to Nanjing or even Shanghai. The central Government in Beijing has promised to build a huge port in the region to serve the Silk Road to Korea and Africa and create new jobs for younger generations.

Forming groups of four participants, each group had to present a scenario for the sub region. The didactic aims of the project were working in teams, discovering the endogenous potentials and challenges of a region, earning how to react to the economic, ecological and social challenges of a region and writing scenarios of future spatial development differing from official government strategies. None of the students had ever been in the sub region. Neither Jiangsu nor the school could provide financial means to visit the region in person. The terms for the students were:

- Compiling regional-spatial information from the web and from books;
- Identifying actors, who could contribute to the development of the region;
- Learning about government policies (economy, environment, transport, social services, etc.);

- Learning about the complexity of regional spatial development;
- Developing own visions for a people-oriented development approach;
- Developing actions to improve the living and working conditions of local residents and small enterprises;
- Identifying the drivers and actors, who could implement the ideas of the Learning to argue and communicate and defend their visions in decision-making environments;
- Understanding the limited role, planners have in urban and regional development.

The scenario writing exercise should encourage the planning students to develop their own visions (dreams) for a region. In a first session, however, they rather presented government strategies from the web. This showed that they were trained rather to copy successful planning projects rather than develop their own creative thinking. Learning planning theory seems to be more important for the students than understanding the challenges, requirements and aspirations of people in the country, which is rapidly urbanizing and transforming into a powerful modern state, changing lifestyles and working conditions for its people. In subsequent sessions, under my pressure, the students they showed some courage to develop their own dreams for the region. While the official plans for the region reflected the mainstream economic development road maps of the national Government in Beijing, the students explored more realistic scenarios to raise the quality of life of the people in the region. Their scenarios focused on the demographic and ecological challenges the region is confronted with and on the concerns of local residents. Regrettably the School did not

organize a visit to the place for giving the students an opportunity to present to and discuss their scenarios with local decision-makers and hear why their dreams will not find political approval. Most probably, concerns that the student proposals. Most likely, concerns that the student proposals would be seen as a critique of official plans for the sub-region caused the School not to organize the presentation.

3.11. Macao: A Las Vegas-Inspired Venetian Place

It was not gambling that drew me to visit Macao in 2010 when academic invitations brought me to Hong Kong. I was just curious to see the Venetian, a casino in Venetian style developed by the American Las Vegas Sands Corporation from 2004 to 2007. Macao, one of the earliest settlements built by the Portuguese colonial conquests is considered the Las Vegas or Monaco of Asia. The long story is quickly told. In the 13th century, the sparsely populated Macau peninsula at the mouth of the Pearl River Delta (2) became a refuge for thousands of refugees who had to flee from the Mongols invading from the north. In 1497, Portuguese sailors and traders, followed by Catholic missionaries, made Macau their trading and mission base. From there, the Spanish Jesuit Francis Xavier wanted to Christianize China. Founded in 1594 by the Jesuits, the University of Macau is the first western university in Asia. Here, Matteo Ricci and Adam Schall were prepared for their teaching positions at the imperial court in Beijing. In 1544, the city of Macau was officially founded. As a trade hub between China and Japan, the city reached its peak in the 16th century and was one of the richest cities in the world at the time. This can still be seen in the imposing facade of the Sao Paulo Cathedral, built between 1620 and

1627 by Japanese and Cantonese architects based on a design by an Italian Jesuit, which burned down in 1835. It is a first-class cultural and historical monument and Macau's landmark. Old Macau was recognized as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2005. "With its historic street, residential, religious and public Portuguese and Chinese buildings, the historic center of Macao provides a unique testimony to the meeting of aesthetic, cultural, architectural and technological influences from East and West". With the increasing importance of the crown colony of Hong Kong established by the British, Macau lost its economic importance in the 18th century, even though the city had a brief heyday as a location for the slave trade in the 19th century, as this was banned in Hong Kong under British law. Under the Portuguese dictator Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, Macau was declared an overseas province of Portugal in 1951, but was then handed over to China in 1999. Portuguese colonial rule was comparatively relaxed. Chinese and Western cultures are mixed. Macau also served as a refuge for many Chinese reformers who were in conflict with the Chinese authorities, such as Sun Yat-Sen. Even before it was handed over to China, Macau was a famous and notorious gambling location, whose casinos were monopolistically controlled by the Chinese billionaire Stanley Ho until 2001. Macau is the only place in China where

gambling, is legally permitted. All of this made Macau a special place.

Today Macau is divided into three parts. Over 700,000 people live and over 350,000 work in the three parallel worlds of the three-part city: Old Macau, Casino Macau, and New Macau, a city which emerged under Chinese administration after 1999. Old Macau still retains the charm of a Portuguese colonial city, largely protected primarily for tourism. (In 2024, this number was over 14 million!). In Casino City, five casinos now offer gambling and consumer paradises, including the Venetian, an artificial Venetian cityscape with a campanile, a canal with gondolas, bridges, and squares. The third, the New City, is a modern town expansion as it can be found in many Chinese cities, whose urban density would not be acceptable by Europeans. The city, with its three distinct urban islands that coexist peacefully, is very different from other Chinese cities. The old, "slow" Macau has no connection to the gambling city. The casino city looks like being parachuted in competing with a mélange of Venice and Las Vegas. The new Macau breaks with the city's history and culture and neglects the human scale. It does not have any urban charm. Macau is an unusual place that particularly impressively reflects the complexity of modernity, a modernity that represents an always uncertain but groundbreaking future. (Kunzmann 2004b, 2019b).

Figures 6. a,b, and c: Venice in Macao



(Photo and archive of the author)

3.12. Kinmen: Nightmare Island

Kinmen is not a dream island in Asia that lures European-weary tourists from Germany to spend their holidays on the beach and snorkel in coral reefs. Kinmen is a historical battlefield, an archipelago of approximately 150 sq km, located 280 km from Taiwan (China), but just two km from Fujian Province on the Chinese mainland. The archipelago, home to over 100,000 inhabitants, is administered by Taiwan. In Europe, Kinmen is also known as Quemoy, because a Cold War front between the USA and China ran there in the 1960s. Taiwan was under Japanese rule until 1945, but unlike Taiwan, Kinmen was not part of Japanese rule between 1895 and 1945; rather, it was part of the Fujian Province of the Republic of China (1912-1949) from 1912 onwards. In 1949, Kinmen became a battlefield of Communist and Nationalist armed forces of China. After the Kuomintang troops were forced to flee the Chinese mainland in 1949, they were able to hold the Kinmen Islands. With American military assistance Kinmen was subsequently developed into a fortress for the defense of Taiwan. The use of radios, radio telephones, and paper kites was prohibited due to fears that they could be used to transmit messages to the mainland. Basketballs were banned because they could have been used to aid in the transfer of information. Since the Kinmen archipelago opened to visitors in 2001, the government in Taipei has taken increased steps to develop the island for tourism and to preserve its cultural sites. Today, Kinmen is a green parkland. However, a challenge remains in Taiwan. Because the existing land and buildings of the veteran settlements in Taiwan are owned by the central government by law, the rehabilitation must be financially self-sustaining. This can only

be achieved through cooperation with local governments, as this requires a change in the zoning in the land use plan. Since urban development is a political process everywhere, and land in inner cities is valuable in Taiwan as well, it is easy to understand why cities also sought to capitalize on the conversion of veterans' settlements.

In 2013, I was invited to Taiwan to give lectures at several universities, and to the Taipei city government, about the successes of urban renewal and experiences with the conversion of military facilities in Germany. The occasion was political controversy about the future of KMT veterans' housing projects, which were built in Taiwan in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The veteran settlement rehabilitation program was again actively promoted between 2008 and 2016. Invited by the National Kaohsiung University of Applied Sciences, upgraded 2023 to the National Kinmen Institute of Technology, a small Canadian plane operated by Mandarin Airlines brought me to Quemoy University in Kinmen for a lecture on conversion experiences in Germany. For me, the invitation to Taiwan was a good opportunity to familiarize myself with the success story of the conversion of military installations and barracks in Germany.

In my simultaneously translated lecture at Quemoy University, I reported on the successes of the conversion of military installations in Germany, a success story of urban development in Germany that is little known abroad. Most listeners in Taiwan were unaware that, even after reunification, American, British, French, and Belgian soldiers were still stationed in Germany within NATO, even though, after the reunification of the two German states in 1990, a large portion of the troops,

especially all Russian troops, were withdrawn from Germany. Many barracks and military facilities were returned to the German state and made available to municipalities that submitted well-founded applications. I described the process by which these barracks were converted from military to civilian facilities, mostly into affordable housing projects (for example in Augsburg, Fürth, Leipzig, Freiburg, or Munich), but also into university campuses, such as in Lüneburg or in Heidelberg, where the withdrawal of the headquarters of the American armed forces prompted a model project for sustainable urban development under the banner of an international building exhibition (IBA).

My presentation was rewarded by a guided tour around the island and a bottle of local liquor. The scenic island has become a kind of war museum with houses in typical Fujian style, but it still bears some traces of the war. The Chinese Nationalist Army had hidden its boats in canals to ward off a Chinese attack. Shattered American tanks stand on the beaches. Access to many beach areas is still prohibited due to mines still buried in the sandy soil. Several museums display weapons, aircraft, tanks, and knives made from Chinese grenades. The entire island is crisscrossed by underground canals and tunnels, some of which can be visited as part of guided tours. All the underground military sites and battle sites have been transformed into a kind of Disney amusement park, visited daily by thousands of tourists, mainly from mainland China, who are shown the underground facilities and battle sites. Even the military brothel, built and managed for the lonely soldiers, has been converted into a tourist resort with a small thematic museum and a café. The island, with two famous liquor factories, has retained some of its architectural identity, which is still supported by the Chinese

residents who made their fortunes in other parts of Asia. Kinmen is becoming a location for tax-free shopping malls but also a second home for people who are seeking peace and quiet in an uncertain future.

4. Conclusion

It does not make any sense to sum up the above narratives. They neither follow any systematic theoretical road map nor offer a comprehensive account of the state of the arts of urban and regional development and planning in China. My motive has not been to add a dimension to a theory of planning in China.

Instead, I draw a few personal conclusions from observations made during my frequent visits and views out of many hotel windows, my reading, study tours, and, not to forget, during numerous discussions with Chinese hosts at dinners and banquets, which acquainted me again and again with the immense wealth of Chinese food.

The era of accelerated urban development in China can be compared with the "*Gründerzeit*", a period of promoterism which, within the context of industrialization, transformed European cities during the late 19th and early 20th century. China's economic and even social development and transition from a mainly rural country to a world power is impressive (Friedmann 2005; Lincoln 2021; Wang 2025; Wu 2015; Yi 2014) The construction industry has been the main driver and winner of the development of hundreds of new towns in the hinterland of metropolitan cities.

The unparalleled rapid development of a national high-speed train network system, the triumphant growth of the national automobile industry and global sports

events, such as the summer and winter Olympics, have raised the global image of China and strengthened national pride. Its rise to a high-tech economy, using digital technologies is driven by political ambitions to raise the urbanization rate and realized by ambitious GDP-conscious local mayors and party secretaries, as well as by influential Chinese and international investors and creative millionaires. Rapid decision-making is one of the advantages of the established top-down system. Local governments are under immense pressure to compete for international and national investment and for political support. Success stories are crucial to demonstrate achievements and good governance. Good ranking figures are loved. Once politically decided, professionally planned and designed infrastructure projects are immediately implemented. Speed seems to be a cultural value. The established top-down system is not as rigid, as it is seen from an outside perspective. It gives space for experiments to learn what could be done. If local and regional projects and initiatives are successful, they are hailed, rewarded, much communicated and replicated elsewhere in the country. The enormous creativity of a young generation of well-educated professionals is driving learning and innovation. The broad range of policy actions in the field of traditional and smart infrastructure development, digitalization and sustainable development are just one example (Kunzmann 2017c, 2017d; Zhang and Wu 2024).

Policies and projects, which have not met the political expectations, are silently filed away. Officially the civil society is not involved in urban development, though there are signs that groups below the all-encompassing dominant development umbrella of provincial or local governments are organizing actions to bring residents

together who wish to raise the quality of living and provide places for communication and cultural activities. Over the last decades a new demanding middle class has emerged in China. This class enjoys consumption and loves luxury product, preferably European cars as well as fashion and kitchen equipment, though Chinese products are increasingly replacing imports and even find consumers beyond China. In order to satisfy the demands of the growing middle class, tourism is seen as a valuable instrument to develop rural regions in scenic environments, to make use of endogenous natural resources, of landscapes and historical sites, to reduce inequalities and to improve the rural villages and convince young rural residents not to leave the countryside seeking employment in large cities accelerate tourism development.

However, as all over the world, social disparities in China have increased. Even though land in China is a public good, the use of land, regulated by leasehold principles, has made many creative and some scrupulous investor's millionaires. The next battlefield of public policies will be the regeneration, modernization and maintenance of hastily built housing in China. This will be hampered by the lack of housing management competence and crafts specialized in repairing and adapting buildings on the basis of technologies, using new sustainable building materials. This will be a next field where China can learn from Europe (Yi and Kunzmann 2017) in exchange for knowledge in smart city development, a field where, mainly due to privacy concerns, European cities are lagging behind. The times when China was dependent on knowledge from the West and invited European architects, planners and engineers to share their competence in urban design, spatial planning, and urban governance with Chinese planners, are

fading. In many fields, Chinese products and technologies have become more efficient, and they are cheaper.

The days will come when European city governments will have to invite Chinese architects, planners, and engineers to contribute their immense creativity and give advice in the application of digital technologies in urban development.

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