Books

Zhu Jianfei
Chinese Spatial Strategies: Imperial Beijing 1420–1911

Wu Hung
Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space

Beijing is unquestionably China’s most famous city. Home to foreigners since Marco Polo’s late thirteenth-century arrival, Beijing’s archives and monuments always offer new discoveries. Two recent books focused on Beijing offer divergent approaches to the study of this age-old city. Zhu Jianfei’s first book, *Chinese Spatial Strategies*, investigates the political, geopolitical, and formal purposes of the Chinese capital, whereas senior scholar Wu Hung’s *Remaking Beijing* explores twentieth-century Beijing through politics and personal narrative. Wu’s book is the more successful and is likely to have wider readership and a longer-lasting impact.

Zhu’s *Chinese Spatial Strategies*, a theoretical and sociological investigation of urban planning, focuses on how space was used to accomplish imperial goals during China’s last two dynasties, Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911), specifically from 1420 (about a decade after the northern relocation of the Ming primary capital from Nanjing to Beijing) until the fall of imperial China. The questions and issues Zhu addresses are profound: Beijing as a geopolitical map; the relation between the city plan and imperial ideology; how Beijing’s design represents an interaction between central authority and urban society; the Forbidden City as an expression of power; what the placement of religious institutions conveys; and how the purposes and architectural forms of Beijing compare with those of European cities. If no single book has adequately answered all of them, certainly these questions have been asked many times by architects, urban planners, and historians. Indeed, if there is a fundamental issue to raise about Zhu’s book, it is that more basic, straightforward studies have tackled these questions and answered them more directly, if less theoretically.

Zhu begins with the premise that there exists a distinctively Chinese approach to space and planning and that those who have attempted to understand it have been too focused either on the form and layout of the city (namely urban planners and architects) or on symbolism and spirituality (sinologists and religious historians). He does not say that these studies are erroneous but rather are misguided and not expansive enough. Zhu promises that his examination of Beijing will be more analytical than those of the past, with a view toward social realism and close attention to historical context. Thereby, he will place Beijing in the contemporary mind-set of theoretical discourse. The goals are lofty but, in this reviewer’s opinion, vague.

Zhu tells the reader, for example, that the book “wanders through different areas and employs different approaches, in order to address different issues” and that “the work combines a comprehensive coverage of areas with an analytical focus upon space and spatial arrangement” (2). Further, he states that the problem of visual perception will be raised—“seeing is examined not in an immediate, personal experience, but in a developed, mediated, institutued practice” (3). He promises to engage the reader with Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson’s *The Social Logic of Space* (1984) as well as a range of analysts from Michel Foucault to China’s classical philosophers Han Feizi and Sun Zi.

The first third of *Spatial Strategies* essentially introduces Beijing as it relates to the history of Chinese capitals; as a city of imperial and Confucian ideology; as a city of walls, fortifications, and open spaces; and as a place for social gatherings and entertainment. Zhu seeks to understand the large open areas as points of integration for more distant elements of the city. He suggests that Beijing should be studied in terms of its formal plan and its actual space: the emperor and his symbolism represent the formal and the idealistic while the actual city space encompasses the regions that accommodate the rest, the sociopolitical. Zhu’s concluding statements to this section of the book—“Beijing was primarily a space of the state” (90) and “Beijing is both total and complex” (93) are not notably different from declarations in more conventional studies such as those by Arthur Wright and Sen-dou Chang in G. W. Skinner’s *The City in Late Imperial China* (1977), Hou Renzhi’s numerous essays in Chinese periodical literature of the 1950s through 1980s, Paul Wheatley’s 1975 study of the Chinese city in *Ekistics* 39, or Alfred Schinz’s coverage of Beijing in *The Magic Square: Cities in Ancient China* (1996).

Part two of the book explores Beijing as political space, building to the
conclusion that the architecture of the city served the state and to the statement that “the Forbidden City was both instrumental and symbolic” (193). Yet, such a sweeping deduction is too generalized, and the concepts that lead to it are not new. The importance of the walled Forbidden City and its palaces, the presence of the military in the city, and the importance of the school of thought known as Legalism are part of any discussion of Beijing. Zhu uses cell maps to elucidate his argument, viewing key points of the city from other key points to conclude, for example, that: the vertical progression through Beijing follows the linear order; clear axes divide the city into eastern and western sectors and into quadrants; the northward approach to the palace-city from the Meridian Gate requires passage through eleven spaces; the city is designed for orderly progression; the Hall of Great Harmony (not referred to by its name) is the central point of imperial Beijing; and the southern courtyard is ceremonial as opposed to functional. A chapter entitled “Constructs of Authority” concludes that the emperor is the pinnacle of the pyramid. Now, more than two-thirds through the book, the diagrams offer new views of a city whose plans have been published hundreds of times, but the conclusions of the research offer no surprises.

The last issues addressed in Spatial Strategies are religion and aesthetics. Religion is the term for imperial ceremonies, particularly those performed at the Altar of Heaven complex. Aesthetics provides an opportunity to look again at the linear plan of Beijing—at scale, centrality, and the purpose of walls—as well as to view Beijing alongside Piero della Francesca’s “View of an Ideal City” and an aerial image of Versailles. It is also the appropriate place to include one of the most famous groups of paintings of Beijing, scroll twelve of “The Kangxi Emperor’s Southern Tour,” displaying in full ceremonial decoration the city to which the emperor returns (Kangxi reigned 1662–1722), painted by a contemporary of the emperor. Zhu’s purposes in illustrating the long scroll—to offer evidence of folding and unfolding, movement and temporality, dispersion and fragmentation, large space and infinity, and to associate them with the city that unfolds as microcosms of a macrocosm—are discussed in depth in Maxwell K. Hearn’s dissertation and his other writings on the subject, none of which is referenced in this book.¹

Spatial Strategies does not offer radical, fresh observations about China’s most explored city but rather new packaging for well-argued concepts. Foucault, Bourdieu, and the philosophers of China’s classical age are applicable to Beijing, this reviewer would suggest, because great theory finds relevance in great design, and the design of Beijing is as profound as any city ever has been.

Wu’s book, by contrast, confirms that new approaches and new meaning can be found in a great city. Like Spatial Strategies, Remaking Beijing places politics at the heart of the city, but in a manner that perhaps only the author could accomplish. Wu, who witnessed China’s most cataclysmic social and political reforms, discusses Beijing as he travels in and out of the city through six decades.

The author writes from both personal and art historical perspectives. The two are easy to distinguish because each uses a different font, but the story line is seamless. The central theme of these narratives is the implications of political space, focused on Tiananmen Square. He begins the only place one could, with 4 June 1989. Yet, the first chapter of the book is also a study of the great memorial at the other end of the square, the Monument to the People’s Heroes, iconographically explained here as well as in any English work. The chapter ends with another structure that interrupts the line between Tianan Gate and the Monument to the People’s Heroes—the Mao Mausoleum. Chapter one is as carefully crafted as the book, setting the scene for the next chapter, on Mao’s portrait at Tiananmen and Mao’s and the gate’s central position in Beijing and China during the second half of the twentieth century.

Leading to the discussion of Mao’s portrait is a review of demonstrations with the potential for political upheaval at Tiananmen in 1918–19 (the May 4th Movement), 1925–26 (the June 10th demonstration), 1935–36 (the anti-Japanese aggression rally) and 1946–48 (primarily student demonstrations against the Republican government). Midway through chapter two, the highly political tone of the book turns sharper as Wu discusses Tiananmen’s centerpiece. The reader learns that the symbol of the proletarian movement, five stars signifying the leadership of the people shining above Tianan Gate, was installed on the gate only briefly. The logical expression of the new government turned into the oil painting we see today, whose photographic source and painter were approved by Mao and for which a coterie of painters has been available ever since should replica replacements be needed. Here Wu writes as art historian, showing the antecedents of this enormous painting in Chinese emperor and ancestor portraits. In his personal narrative at the end of the chapter, he uses the words “worship of Mao,” informing the reader that just as Mao had instructed that his mausoleum interrupt the central space south of the Palace Museum, Deng Xiaoping similarly informed a reporter in 1980 that Mao’s portrait would forever hang at Tiananmen.

From here, Wu moves to the architecture of exhibitions and exhibitionism. The latter is explained through political demonstrations in Tiananmen and the former through three monuments in the square: the Great Hall of the People, Museum of Chinese History, and Chairman Mao Memorial Hall. Like Zhu, Wu finds a reason to sanction his discussion with Foucault, stating that the two forms of display correspond to the theorist’s heterotopias. The thrust of the chapter, however, is architecture. Wu traces changes that have occurred south of the Forbidden City and illustrates them with photographs and plans of Beijing’s earlier days. As in chapter two, the author suggests imperial sources for Maoist design, proposing that the origins of the square lie in ritual architecture of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Wu stops short
of saying that Mao’s architects knew that their designs of the square’s architecture continued imperial building schemes in new packaging, but he implies this idea in the pictures, if not the text.

Chapter four introduces the fascinating topic of time keeping, whose direct relevance to the square, like the subjects of other chapters, has multiple layers of meaning including inseparability from Beijing’s historic past. Bell or drum towers occupied central positions in traditional Chinese cities and towns, as their purposes were to announce the time by the beating of a drum or ringing of a bell. One of each has stood on the main axis of imperial Beijing since the days of Kubilai Khan. Building on past precedent, a massive digital clock was added to Tiananmen Square in 1994 to count down the days and seconds until the return of Hong Kong to China on 1 July 1997. As in the earlier sections of the book, Wu interweaves the politically laden icon with legend, history, and symbolism. Wu’s personal narrative includes his nanny’s stories, heard on childhood trips with her to the market near the Drum Tower, and the precious watch he received on his fifteenth birthday at the height of the Great Leap Forward. Meanwhile, Wu the art historian discusses the appearance of Western clocks in China, both as gifts to emperors (now in the Western clock rooms of the Forbidden City) and as prominently displayed time-keeping devices on Western-style buildings in China or in Chinese paintings. But Wu misses the opportunity to cite Antonino Forte’s pathbreaking book, Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock (1988).

The last chapters address contemporary art and urban planning, and the specific subject or backdrop of most of the art reviewed is either Mao or Tiananmen. Through spectacular images and personal anecdotes or experiences with artists, Wu demonstrates how they countered, objectified, and ultimately displaced (or “re-framed”) Mao with the intent of emptying the square. The last chapter, a coda, deals first with Beijing’s longest street, the east–west axis Chang’anjia that cuts through the heart of the old imperial line, then moves to the ring roads, and finally the city’s redesign for the Asian Games in 1991 and the Olympics in 2008. He offers the conclusion that Maoist leadership has passed, but Jiang Zemin’s Tiananmen does not signify a transformation from the Maoist era.

Remaking Beijing is a powerful book about art, architecture, history, politics, and society, and how through a city square the politically inspired youth challenged the past but could not release themselves from its symbols. With such a strong story and such potent images, it is a credit to Wu that he writes with the scholarly apparatus of notes and bibliography, ensuring that his book will not be another journalistic view of the city.

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Note

On Alberti
Branko Mitrovic
Serene Greed of the Eye: Leon Battista Alberti and the Philosophical Foundations of Renaissance Theory

Liisa Kanerva
Between Science and Drawings: Renaissance Architects on Vitruvius’s Educational Ideas

Paolo Fiore, editor, in collaboration with Arnold Nesselrath
La Roma di Leon Battista Alberti. Umanisti, architetti e artisti all’apertura dell’antico nella città del Quattrocento

Twenty-five years ago, a senior figure in Renaissance scholarship told me, “Why study Alberti, he has been done.” Indeed at that time, Alberti was a more or less canonic figure already framed by the likes of Ernst Cassirer, Rudolf Wittkower, Cecil Grayson, and Joan Gadol. But Alberti, as it turned out, was more elusive than one thought. Though Anthony Grafton has recently tried to maintain Alberti as the consummate humanist at the core of the development of the modern western mind, others have envisioned more complex possibilities. In fact, it is safe to say that today Alberti has become a thoroughly slippery character, and the age in which he lived was more complex than one might have imagined three decades ago.

The journal Albertiana, founded in 1998 under the leadership of Francesco Furlan, and the Fondazione Centro Studi Leon Battista Alberti, with its yearly conferences beginning in 1998, have produced a veritable mini-industry of papers discussing Alberti’s life and work. In the United States, by way of contrast, Alberti scholarship seems to have lost some steam recently, perhaps related to the general demotion of the Renaissance’s importance in American academe, especially in architectural history. This is partly why the most recent publications on Alberti are written outside of the U.S. academic framework: Kanerva is Finnish; Mitrovic is a Serb living and teaching in New Zealand; and La Roma di Leon Battista Alberti is a catalog of an Italian exhibition that features such European scholars as Arnold Bruschi, Arturo Calzona, and Christoph L. Frommel. The book by Kanerva, Between Science and Drawings: Renaissance Architects on Vitruvius’s Educational Ideas, is a sharply reasoned study of the architect in Renaissance theory. Mitrovic’s book, Serene Greed of the Eye, is a mature and carefully reasoned analysis of Alberti’s philosophical system. The catalog La Roma di Leon Battista Alberti, beautifully and lavishly illustrated (as one would expect from a Skira publication), tries to frame Alberti in the broader context of fifteenth-century Rome.