China in the urban age

A multidisciplinary approach

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How to choose a theme for a centre that intends to organise but not direct, connect but not predefine, the new ideas that can emerge from the interaction of a diverse membership? A thematic concentration of some of our resources is a way to suggest problems that need to be addressed and by definition cannot be the object of a single gaze. A theme can also reveal unrecognised links, as well as stimulating not only new answers but also new, original questions.

We have thought of a theme comprehensive enough to touch the research interests of many around this wide community of knowledge. We intend not to exclude other research undertakings that may not readily fit in this framework or are specific in nature, but rather plan to devote "extra resources" to a series of new activities, without affecting the traditional ways in which the Centre funds the activities of our members. We will focus these extra resources on advancing multidisciplinary collaboration and training on one comprehensive area of research, our inaugural theme, which we define as "China in the Urban Age".

Defining challenges for everyone: the urban container

China is undergoing a comprehensive urban transformation aimed at further increasing its economic growth, and modernising its population, production, economy and delivery of welfare. The emergence of cities has been central across the ages to the economic and social viability of economic models in the country, to the territorial role of the state, to the emergence and articulation of multiple local cultures and languages, to the relationship between markets and areas of agricultural production, to the creation of new classes, to industrialisation, to the concentration of resources, to the delivery and organisation of services, to the unwanted deterioration of the environment and health, to the improvement of the built environment, to the production and consumption of food, to the demographic revolution, and to the development of new media and technologies.

Three considerations are at the centre of our research strategy:

1. Almost every aspect that interests the sciences, social sciences and humanities encounters urbanisation as a goal or a challenge: better, more secure, more equal, more efficient, more culturally grounded, altogether more sustainable;

2. Nowhere in the modern world has the phenomenon of territorial and social transformation been more rapid, comprehensive and all-encompassing than in China;

3. While disciplines tend to advance their own concerns in isolation, there is increasingly the need for a hub connecting diverse findings, languages and questions.

Yet, the study of cities is often driven by an attention to the disconnections rather than the connections: looking at the material without considering the ethical, dealing with the present without reflecting on the past, focusing on values while ignoring the material improvements achieved through technology, or separating the biological from the environmental. We forget that the people, the buildings, the roads that allow them to move, the history that made the place, the forms of expression that they create, are all connected.

By launching this theme, which we will pursue for the next five years, we want to claim the increasing impossibility of approaching these urban issues as discreet, separate or as solely relevant to China.

It is the ambition of the China Studies Centre through this theme not to suggest research directions but to provide opportunities for the creation of fruitful "connections". Intellectually, we are thinking of this theme as a container of ideas, which can expand in different and unexpected directions; and a converter, where the final outcome of this intellectual exercise is greater than the sum of its parts.

In concrete terms, we are thinking of using our resources strategically to advance a multidisciplinary urban activity that will characterise the work of the centre while supporting the different souls of this university's community. Adding 200 million urbanites to the population in a decade or building hundreds of new "green cities" – these constitute some of the visible signs of a transformation that needs to be investigated through an understanding of the processes that lie behind it. Once we accept that we inevitably see only one aspect of such processes in full, what becomes necessary to our investigation is no single discipline but rather a series of thematic connections and mutual translations.

The "Urban Age" is already integral to The University of Sydney's strategies in areas of collective research. Similarly, multidisciplinarity defines the University's work and has led to the creation of several important initiatives - from the Charles Perkins Centre, researching lifestyle-related diseases, to Sydney Nano, providing a very broad framework to the field of nanotechnology, to the Sydney Environment Institute, and the recently launched Planetary Health Platform. We advocate strong collaboration, not only among all the faculties of this university, but also with the multidisciplinary initiatives.

Ways of thinking of the city: constructive pairs

We feel the need to open the disciplinary silos and to challenge well-established categories. Therefore, we put forward "pairs" of ideas that may help bridge the interests of different disciplines. We have no intention of exhausting the list of possible areas of research (that is why we need the research),   but we can try to bring order to the messy reality of cities. Here are some constructive pairs that we hope will stimulate creative connections.

Health and society (a "planetary" approach)

The University of Sydney has recently launched a Planetary Health Platform, which is challenging the understanding of health as only a biomedical condition connected to the workings of our bodies, highlighting the importance of the social, cultural and ecological health of the biosphere and societies in which we live. China is the right place to study solutions to many of the global challenges suggested by this approach. On the one hand, China is a place that manifests the relevant issues (the need for a healthier diet, the production and consumption of clean and more nutritious food, the quality of the soil and of the air, more efficient transport and housing, the challenges of clean energy). Bu t it can also be the hub of research networks that lead to global collaborations, it can provide epidemiological information that helps find solutions, it can experiment with welfare delivery systems, and can be both the beneficiary and the provider of solutions that have not yet become available. In this respect, it interests us to stimulate an engaged discussion in China about this idea and to locate The University of Sydney squarely at the centre of this debate. To do so, we need to demonstrate that we are capable of producing solutions that integrate the interests of the human condition to those of ecosystems.

Spaces and places of connection (building sustainability and connecting humans and artefacts)

Creating places out of nothing is an activity to which human beings have devoted themselves for thousands of years. Turning a space into a place is a complex activity that leads to the construction of buildings and artefacts, devising rituals and writing rules of coexistence based on shared values. It also means building connections between people, and between people and objects. In this context, researching the Chinese place‐making experience means researching the action of human culture and capital on the territory, the impact of gentrification, as well as urban policies. The construction of large, well‐organised urban communities seems to be the modern answer to the need to simplify society, and serves numerous purposes: governing the land and society, favouring transport and workforce availability, concentrating high-quality population or capital, increasing social control, better exploiting resources, avoiding conflicts, producing and moving goods more efficiently, provide better services. China offers a long history and a complex polity through which to study the diverging goals held by human beings as they have tamed their territory.

The study of China also provides an important paragon stone for research done elsewhere, without being simply a footnote to disciplinary studies. Questions of the sustainability of the built environment intersect productively with historical experience, but also with the study of inequality and migration, for example, and the equitable use and management of natural resources, as well as their preservation.

Likewise, significant questions remain about connections built around concentrated forms of communication; the diplomatic agency exercised by cities; population change; the health consequences of changing lifestyles; the design and social penetration of new technologies, or new forms of organisation changing the economy (low carbon experiments, sharing economy, innovative finance, and the 'internet of things', have all found fertile ground in China). Making cities is ultimately about people, the artefacts they make and how they interact. The urban form can thus often elicit significant knowledge about the individuals and groups that built it.

Production and consumption (why the city?)

During the early socialist years in China, cities were supposed to become places of production, to replace the capitalist cities of consumption. The idea of a city as a production base perfectly complemented the early heavy industrialisation goals of the socialist authorities. We are seeing today a reversal of this situation, with industrialisation largely happening outside cities, which are in turn becoming cities of service, as in other parts of the world. But this distinction between production and consumption is still at the core of our study of China's urbanisation. Are new cities, planned to be engines of "consumption", more sustainable than the polluted cities of the present and the past? How do people consume the city? Are they shaping global trajectories?

China's natural environment has deteriorated in the last thirty years, and moving industries outside the major cities hasn't been enough t o block that trend. Alarming levels of air, water and soil pollution today plagues Chinese cities. The study of urbanisation requires a disenchanted look at the production process, the possible positive and negative impact of new technologies deemed necessary by new production plans, and the need to preserve and improve the quality of land. At the same time we need to keep in mind that this is the f astest growing industrial system in human history and that Chinese citizens may experience, in their very lifespan, both polluted i ndustrial cities of the socialist type and the current polluted cities of the post-industrial boom. The rapid changes in production technologies are challenging what is generally thought of as a rather flexible workforce, with consequences often seen only outside the factories. Consumers in turn are caught in the middle of this transformation and their behaviour is rapidly changing, affecting the future direction of the economy.

Wealth and poverty (whose city?)

At the centre of this urbanisation trend is the issue of wealth and poverty, the problem of a decreasing amount of resources being unequally distributed among the population, and the use of the urban discourse of modernity as a fix‑f or‑a ll that will determine the directions development will take. We also understand, for example, how wealth and poverty are consequences of social positions (relative proximity to the regime for example); results of different exposure to risk; of an unbalanced gendered distribution of wealth and opportunities; or sometimes of geographic, serendipitous factors that make some richer and others poorer (for example the sudden enrichment of some villagers expropriated during top-down urbanisation); or may be a consequence of historical conditions. The study of inequality, wealth and poverty needs, increasingly, to look at access and availability to natural resources, including clean water and air, as well as energy, technology, finance, and work opportunities, factors suggesting an extension to the study of what a human right represents. Are there tensions emerging between the need to engineer top-down solutions to societal crises, and the increasing demands of citizens who expect civic rights?

Attention to both the macro and historical situation on one side, and to the locality on the other, also has the potential to contribute to debates about the relationship between migration and poverty, between the crisis of agriculture and the increasing precarity and displacement of work, between the need to revamp the welfare system and the legal regulations controlling population movement and access to urban welfare. Among the reasons of poverty and risk is the greater or lower capacity of urban areas to resist recurrent environmental disaster and the human intervention at the origin of that disaster, for example mining to produce energy to patch the energy needs of inefficient cities. Equally, wealth is not unproblematic, with its capacity to increase segregation and power hierarchies while transforming behaviours; or to shape transport, increasing consumption and the desire to access information and knowledge, driving innovation and expanding the study of markets.

Arts and cultures (hidden losses and gains in urbanisation)

Cities are large and lively places, they change rapidly, and they host a great variety of cultural and subcultural phenomena. The dominance of the large city has, however, also produced a challenge to indigenous practices and rural lifestyles, which are increasingly under pressure in the process of modernisation. In this sense, Chinese cities, like all metropolises, are both creating new and syncretic cultural expressions through the arts, and weakening cultural manifestations that are seen as not fitting into the definitions of modernity of which cities are symbolic articulations. China, yet again, is experiencing this phenomenon at an extraordinary pace, and with sometimes irreparable cultural damage. Yet cities are the stages on which China's urban past is being re-built, and often re-imagined. As such the study of traditions and nostalgia, of tangible and intangible heritage, and the adaptation of indigenous cultures and the reimagined past should all be at the centre of our investigation as well.

The University of Sydney is well placed to think of ways in which all this can be done in a "sustainable" way, while fostering disciplinary diversity and cultural depth, and welcoming the city as the cauldron of inspiration and connections that it can be. Such large phenomena as mass tourism, education, media and communications are making the city easier to reach and navigate, and impacting on the directions urbanisation is taking in China, and the world.