From Ritual City to Modern City: The City Space Transformation of Xi’an in the Early 20th Century

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Abstract—The urban layout of Xi’an city (the capital Chang’an in the Tang dynasty) was shaped by feudal etiquette, but this dominant factor was replaced by modern city planning during the period of the Republic of China. This makes Xi’an a representative case to explore the transformation process of Chinese cities in the early 20th century. By analyzing the contrast and connection between the historical texts of city planning and the realistic construction activities recorded by the maps and images, this paper reviews the transformation process of the urban space of Xi’an in the early 20th century and divides it into four phases according to important events that significantly impacted planning and construction activities. Based on this, the entire transformation of Xi’an’s city planning and practices can be characterized by three aspects: 1) the dominant force of the city plan and construction changed with the establishment of modern city administrations; 2) the layout of the city was continuously broadened to meet the demand of modern economy and city life; and, 3) the ritual space was transformed into practical space for commercial and recreational activities.

Keywords—City space, early 20th century, transformation, Xi’an city.

I. INTRODUCTION

Under the influence of Chinese traditional etiquette and government system, the layout of Xi’an had basically maintained the pattern of ‘Lifang’ since the Tang Dynasty [1]. With the gradual weakening of government management and control after the Opium War (1840), formal and informal urban construction activities have gradually transformed the spatial pattern of Xi’an, and the most significant changes happened in the early 20th century. This makes Xi’an a valuable research case to further the understanding of the transformation of Chinese cities in this period. Current research on the city development of Xi’an in the early 20th century mainly focuses on the evolution of urban spatial structure from the perspective of historical geography [2] but is short of the perspective of urban planning to analyze the interactive process between planning and practice. This article thus tries to explore this process and summarize the characteristics of the urban transformation in Xi’an by establishing a comparative connection between planning and practice. This case study of Xi’an will hopefully provide not only references for the historical research of other similar cities but also practical experiences for contemporary city planning.

II. SPONTANEOUS DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT PLANNING

Comparing the maps of Xi’an in the Ming dynasty with those in the Qing dynasty, it can be found that Xi’an’s urban structure in the late Qing Dynasty was basically inherited from the Ming dynasty (Figs. 1, 2). Except for the Manchu City 蒙城, which was an enclosed inner city and served as a base for the Eight Banners, the urban structure did not change significantly in the Qing dynasty. In terms of the roads, four main streets with the Bell Tower 钟楼 as the intersection point constituted the main road skeleton of the city (Fig. 2). However, due to the restrictive management of the Manchu City 满城, the East Street 东大街 and the North Street 北大街 were more like lines of demarcation rather than streets for public transport. As for the different functional areas, the government offices were mainly located near the Bell Tower 钟楼 and the Drum Tower 鼓楼. The North Courtyard 北院门, South Courtyard 南院门 and the surrounding areas formed the most concentrated commercial and recreational area in Xi’an. A large number of sacrifice places such as temples and halls were distributed along the road, forming a sacrifice space in the city.

After the failure of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, the Qing government issued a new policy to carry out systemic reforms. This open policy led to a result that new administrative, financial and commercial institutions, hospitals, and schools gradually settled in the city, though some of them just made use of the original buildings of temples to realize the new function. In general, all these spontaneous construction activities before the Republic of China did not have a structural impact on urban space.

Fig. 1 The Map of Xi’an in the Ming Dynasty [3]

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**III. PRELIMINARY PLANNING AND INFRASTRUCTURE CONSTRUCTION FOR IMPROVING CITY FUNCTIONS**

After the war of warlords ended in 1927, the reunified Nationalist Government had a relatively stable period for state construction and development. In the same year, Xi’an was officially promoted into an administrative city, and this establishment of a municipal management system provided the possibility of unified planning for Xi’an.

In 1927, the Shaanxi Provincial Government Construction Department first formulated the ‘Shaanxi Changan Municipal Construction Plan’, which is the first modern planning of Xi’an [5]. The plan had 12 parts including the construction of roads, parks and commercial streets, repairing the Bell Tower and the Drum Tower, dredging sewers, banning random stalls, setting up road signs, building public toilets and so on, which indicates that the primary aim of this plan is to restore the city damage caused in the successive years of war.

In terms of space planning in this plan, firstly, the road system was set up, in which the four streets centered on the Drum Tower were designated as urban main roads. Secondly, the first market (in the South Courtyard), the second market (in the Chenghuang Temple) and the third market (also known as ‘Changle Shopping Mall’, where Kaiyuan Temple was located) were designated as the commercial area. These three markets would be under the unified management of the municipal administration. Furthermore, it was planned to reorganize the Revolution Park and other new parks as an expanded public entertainment area. This plan eliminated the privileged restrictions of the Manchu City and followed the former spatial form shaped by the spontaneous construction activities of citizens. But it was still a symbol that the government took the first step to lead and control the expansion of the functional areas in the city.

A series of construction activities directed by the government during this period [6] also realized the main purpose of repairing the city appearance, constructing the municipal infrastructure, improving the basic functions of the city and serving the lives of modern citizens. From the Xi’an city map of 1930 (Fig. 3) and other maps of this period [7], it can also be found that the number of administrations, medical services, schools, and factories in the city increased significantly, but their locations were scattered and still not formed in a clear urban spatial order or functional zones.

The building process of the Revolution Park shows another characteristic of the construction practice in this period. The park was located in the site of former Manchu City, and two mass graves were built inside the park to bury the revolutionary soldiers died in the war. The ‘Mingyuan Building’ was removed from the official examination institution of the Qing Dynasty to this park and was renamed the ‘Revolution Pavilion’ (Fig. 4). A memorial
The ceremony was held in the park in 1927, which gathered tens of thousands of people in memory of revolutionary soldiers [9]. In this process, the buildings representing the etiquette and order of the old dynasty were completely moved hurriedly to a new place to accommodate the emerging political and civic activities. This revolutionary enthusiasm for building a new society in Xi’an also made the urban construction not only imperfect but also rather hasty.

Although these three civil planning schemes had different perspectives, they all recognized the realistic needs of systematic planning for Xi’an and intend to adopt Western planning theories and methods to carry out spatial zoning to make Xi’an worthy of the name of the alternate capital.
In addition to non-governmental planning assumptions, the government mainly drafted the ‘Description of the Xijing City Zoning Plan’ 西京市分区计划说明 in 1937 and the ‘Xijing Planning’ 西京规划 in 1941 [12]. These two plans redefined the urban scope of Xi’an with Baqiao 灞桥, Fengshui 沣水, Zhongnan Mountain 终南山, and Weishui 渭水 as the new boundary, so that the development of the city could break through the old city walls and have more space to expand. Setting new cities outside the old Xi’an city indicated that the western satellite city theory influenced the planning idea of Xi’an in this period.

The former plan, ‘Description of the Xijing City Zoning Plan’ 西京市分区计划说明 divided the urban area of Xi’an into six districts, including administrative districts, historical and cultural districts, industrial districts, commercial districts, agricultural experimental districts, and scenic spots. The later plan, ‘Xijing Plan’ 西京规划, followed this functional zoning plan but added another administrative division that divided the newly demarcated urban areas into 10 administrative areas for municipal management (Fig. 7). What is more, it published a comprehensive investigation and analysis of Xi’an, including social conditions such as economy and population, natural conditions such as topography and climate, and the survey results of the built environment situation like administrative buildings, public buildings, places of interest, roads, and other elements. This showed that the zoning plan mentioned above had undergone a process of continuous improvement from at least 1937 to 1941, and was formed based on comprehensive investigation and analysis of Xi’an. After the Nationalist Government promulgated the Urban Planning Law in 1939, ‘Xijing Plan’ 西京计划 was the first but most systematic urban plan of Xi’an that made according to the zoning theories [14].

Actually, before the government of Xi’an had drawn up the plans, construction of these functional areas had already begun and many projects were completed in 1935. The Longhai Railway 陇海铁路 passed Xi’an in 1934, which drove the industry development of this city gradually. The northeastern part of Xi’an’s old city, which used to be the Manchu City in the past, was revived because of its geographical advantage of nearing the new railway station. Besides, more and more space in the city was transformed into public entertainment areas. The Bell Tower, the Drum Tower and the gates of the old Xi’an city walls were no longer used as ceremonial or defensive buildings but were listed as historical sites after repair. Four new city parks like Lianhu Park 莲湖公园 and Jianguo Park 建国公园 were well-built in 1935, and there were even new children’s play facilities along with the traditional pavilions and bridges in the Jianguo Park 建国公园 (Fig. 8).

Additionally, the roads in Xi’an gradually formed a system. The four main roads in the city were further expanded with separated sidewalks and vehicle lanes, and trees were planted along the roads (Fig. 8). At the same time, many new-built branch roads remarkably improved the accessibility of various areas in the city. The municipal department also formulated a special plan for road management and maintenance [15]. The most important change of the road system was the construction of two suburban scenic roads [16]. One was called the Southwestern Section 西南段 from the South Gate 南门 to the Zhongnan Mountain 终南山, and the other was the Xitong Section 西潼段 from the Dongshaomen 东稍门 to the Huaqing Pool 华清池. This kind of scenic road connecting multiple scenic spots should be learned from the construction experience.
of the park system in Europe and America [17]. Their
construction not only facilitated the sightseeing travel of
residents from the city to suburbs, but also strengthened the
connection between Xi’an old city and newly developed cities
outside.

![The West Street Xi'an]  ![The Lao Market Xi'an]  ![The Dongmen Gate Xi'an]  ![The South Gate Xi'an]

Fig. 8 The map of Xi’an and Some Built Municipal Projects (1935) [18]

All in all, both the planning and the construction during this
period have shown that the economic and political needs have
become the main promoting factors guiding the expansion of
urban space and the positioning of functions. Western concepts
and ideas such as Garden City, satellite cities, functional
zoning, and park system are adopted in the planning and
construction practices of this period.

V. CONTINUATION AND ADJUSTMENT OF PLANNING AND
CONSTRUCTION

With the full-scale outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War in
1937 and the official establishment of Chongqing as the
temporary capital by the Nationalist Government in 1940, the
social environment and political status of Xi’an’s planning and
construction ceased to exist. Until the end of this War in 1945,
Xi’an began a new round of post-war reconstruction activities.

In 1947, the ’Xi’an City Division and Road System Plan’ 西安市分区及道路系统计划书 adjusted the urban functional
zoning and divided it into school districts, residential districts,
commercial districts, administrative districts, industrial
districts, middle school districts, university districts, and
commercial districts. Besides, it set three more new cities in the
suburbs of Xi’an and listed a series of municipal constructive
projects, which mostly involve the restoration of parks, roads,
and squares damaged during the war. This plan basically
followed the ‘Xijing Plan’ 西京规划, the most complete and
systematic plan of Xi’an in the early 20th century.

From the map of Xi’an in 1949 (Fig. 9), the main changes in
the layout of Xi’an happened near the railway station. Due to
the transportation advantages brought by the Longhai Railway
陇海铁路, which was the main driving force for urban
construction and development, a dense road network was
formed in the northeast area of the city where the original
utilization rate was low, and a large number of public buildings
and residences were built. The northeastern corner outside the
city wall also formed a new residential area. These changes
coincided with the prediction and guidance of the ‘Xijing Plan’
西京规划 for urban development.

![Fig. 9 The framework of Xi’an city (1949) [3]]

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Through comparing the transformations process of urban
planning and actual construction of Xi’an in the early 20th
century, it is clear that the period from 1932 to 1945 was the
most important stage for the change of Xi’an city. The Garden
City theories, satellite cities, functional zoning, park system,
and other western planning concepts and methods in this period
were systematically introduced and applied, which
fundamentally paved the way to the future development of
Xi’an as a modern city.

The characteristics of this transformation process of Xi’an
can be summarized as follows. First of all, the introduction of a
modern political system brought changes into the main
directions of urban planning and construction, and civil citizens
could provide their opinions and also made contributions to the
city plan making besides the leading role of government.
Secondly, the dual needs of the economy and life forced the
urban space to be increasingly broadened and the traditional
etiquette space constantly kept giving way to commercial
production space and citizen living space. Finally, the theories
and methods of modern Western urban planning (e.g., zoning)
greatly influenced the change of Xi’an city. It was the
interactions between the planning and constructions that
gradually promoted the transformations of Xi’an from a ritual
city to a modern one.

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REFERENCES