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Asia Pacific: PERSPECTIVES

an electronic journal

Volume III · Number 1

May · 2003

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Asia Pacific: Perspectives is a peer-reviewed journal published once a year in May. It welcomes submissions from all fields of the social sciences and the humanities with relevance to the Asia Pacific region.* In keeping with the Jesuit traditions of the University of San Francisco, *Asia Pacific: Perspectives* commits itself to the highest standards of learning and scholarship.

Our task is to inform public opinion by a broad hospitality to divergent views and ideas that promote cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and the dissemination of knowledge unreservedly. Papers adopting a comparative, interdisciplinary approach will be especially welcome. **Graduate students are strongly encouraged to submit their work for consideration.**

* 'Asia Pacific region' as used here includes East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania, and the Russian Far East.

Shifting Boundaries: The Double Life of Walls in Beijing, 1949-1965

by Duanfang Lu, Ph.D. candidate

Abstract

The essay analyzes the persistence of the “wall” as a building typology in the contemporary Chinese landscape despite state condemnation and through successive political changes. Historically China was a society of walls with Beijing typifying this model. While the city wall used to be the most important symbol of the city, upon the consolidation of socialist control in 1949, however, its utility was called into question. As the new government struggled to create a material reality commensurate with their ethical aims, the city wall was seen to represent the old society and was officially condemned. At the same time it was attacked politically, the city wall was also considered the physical hurdle for urban modernization by the public at large. Yet as the era of the city wall in Chinese culture ended, a new one began. By the mid 1960’s work units were constructing walls to define their extents. Many of them were doing this to protect themselves from the potentially malevolent rural areas and the invasion of state upon their real estate under a vague socialist property right system. Hence the “wall” was resurrected as a functional and symbolic element in a new socialist Chinese landscape. Through an investigation of the transition from the city wall to the unit wall as a progression of symbolic importance from one regime of power to the next, the essay characterizes “tradition” not simply as “handed down” but as constantly deconstructed and constructed in a fast-changing society.

The work unit (*danwei*, the employer or organization to which a citizen is assigned) is the principle socio-spatial form which organizes the newly-built areas of the Chinese city since the socialist revolution in 1949 (Parish and Parish, 1986; Lu and Perry, 1997). One of its most striking spatial characteristics is that the work unit often integrates housing, workplace, and the provision of social services within a walled compound (Gaubatz, 1995). The wall was, and still is, the most impressive and most essential physical part of Chinese employment. Up to today, approaching any unit from the outside, the wall is the first structure that one sets eyes on, and one has seldom seen a workplace of any size in China which does not have a brick or concrete barrier around its territory. No matter how small the unit, however plain its buildings, however simple and crude its supporting facilities, the walls are there, and, as a rule, kept in better condition than any other structures within the compound. The wall creates a clear-cut differentiation between the unit and its surroundings, a visible expression of workplace identity, and a boundary protecting its property and social facilities from outsiders’ use (Bjorklund, 1986).

Because in traditional China almost every important ensemble of spaces was a walled enclosure, one would easily attribute the continuity of tradition as the cause of the ubiquity of unit walls in contemporary China. As geographer E. M. Bjorklund states,

[W]hen a new *danwei* is started, wall-building is the first step in construction, not the last as is common in North America. ...From the Chinese point of view, the enclosure of place makes it proper and secure—conducive to effective social interaction and to organization of activities within. Enclosure does not signify negative associations common to walled places in the west. Walls are regarded as a positive and expected way of organizing people. This is the same design, in principle, followed for many centuries for important places (*Ibid.*, 21).

Yet an investigation into the wall-building practice in contemporary China reveals that, while tradition was a contributory predisposition in the rise of the unit wall, it would be a mistake, however, to think that the latter was simply the result of the continuity of the convention. As in traditional China, walls constitute the skeleton of the contemporary city, but the new framework was born out of new social conditions and possessed a spatial pattern significantly different from its precedents.

My analysis starts with the demolition of the city wall in Beijing during the early years after the socialist revolution in 1949. While historically the city wall was the most important symbol of the city, its utility was called into question upon the consolidation of socialist control. As the new government struggled to create a material reality commensurate with their ethical aims, the city wall was seen to represent the “feudalist” tradition and the division between the urban and the rural. At the same time it was attacked politically, the city wall was also considered the physical hurdle for urban modernization by the public at large. In fact, the old walls satisfied a much-needed source of raw materials as the city was transformed into a new modern capital. Yet as the era of the city wall in Chinese culture ended, a new one began. By the mid 1960’s work units were constructing walls to define their extents. Many of them were doing this to protect themselves from the potentially malevolent rural areas and the invasion of state upon their real estate under a vague socialist property right system. Hence the “wall” was resurrected as a functional and symbolic element in the new socialist Chinese landscape.

“Tradition” in its barest sense, according to Edward Shils, means “simply a traditum; it is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present” (Shil, 1981, 12). Through an investigation into the unmaking and making of the wall-building tradition as a progression of symbolic importance from one regime of power to the next, however, the essay characterizes “tradition” not simply as “handed down” but as constantly deconstructed and constructed in its daily reproduction. It is in this on-going process that the same tradition is rehistoricized, appropriated, and transplanted. With a capacity of renewing, while tradition may be held back temporarily in successive political and social changes, it does not disappear easily but tends to reappear in a new context.

This research is mainly based on archival materials available at Beijing Municipal Archives. In the following, I shall first offer a brief history of wall-construction practice in traditional China. I shall then give an account of the demolition of the city wall and the construction of the unit wall in Beijing. The final section provides a discussion of the transition from the city wall to the unit wall.

Walls in Traditional China

Walled enclosure was one of the most basic features of the traditional Chinese landscape (Boyd, 1962, 49). Walls not only physically bounded various kinds of spaces—cities, villages, gardens, temples, houses—they also symbolized the manner of classification in an ordered Chinese environment. The variety and significance of walls can be shown by the fact that the Chinese devoted a number of words to describing their different forms and meanings: high walls around courtyards were called *qiang*, which connoted what was used to shield oneself; house walls and part walls, *bi*, which connoted what warded off and resisted the wind and cold; and low walls, *yuan*, which connoted what one leaned on and thus took as his protection, to take just a few examples (Xu, 2000, 197).

In particular, the importance of the city wall transcended that of other types of walls. Symbolizing authority, order and security, the wall was so central to the Chinese idea of a city that the traditional words for city and wall were identical, the character *cheng* standing for both (Wheatley, 1971, 221). The city wall and the local center of imperial administration were institutionally and conceptually inseparable; an unwalled urban center was almost as inconceivable as a house without a roof. Like city walls in many other societies, those in China were built essentially to protect the city against pirate invasion and peasant rebellion. In fact, before the introduction of modern artillery, Chinese city walls, which were ordinarily surrounded by a moat, were almost indestructible. Their solidity made any attempt to breach them a difficult task, and their height, ranging from five to fifteen meters, made scaling hazardous (Chang, 1977, 77). And similar to the walled cities of the Middle East, the walls around many riverine Chinese cities had the additional function of defense against the floods that were a continual menace in many lowland areas (*Ibid.*, 79).

Besides these practical functions, Chinese elite had attached rich symbolic meanings to the city wall since Zhou times. For the earliest city, the construction of outer walls signified the establishment and maintenance of an ideal order that could be kept in accord with the order of the cosmos, a symbolism in conformity with the circumstances in which individual states strived for power against its rival counterparts. Under the socio-political conditions of imperial China, however, the emphasis of the symbolism shifted from the city being treated as the center of the cosmos to the loyalty of the region to the emperor residing in the imperial capital, the centrality of the imperial government, and the social order that it had established (Xu, 2000, 240-41).

The Mongols interrupted this tradition; few walled cities were constructed under the Yuan dynasty (1280-1368), whose Mongol founders, pastoral in origin, were unsympathetic to the wall-building tradition (Chang, 1977). In order to display their power, at one time the Mongols even forbade city-wall construction throughout China. As walls that predated the Mongol conquest deteriorated during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, they needed repair badly by the time the Mongols were overthrown. In fact, the first half of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) witnessed the advent of “the great age of Chinese wall building,” which restored “the primarily

psychological function of reaffirming the presence of the Chinese state” and reestablished proper social order after a century of Mongol rule (Mote, 1977, 137). Perhaps because of this new significance, while early city walls were simply pounded earth ramparts, Ming engineers now faced them with bricks, ceramic blocks, or stones.

Intensive wall construction practice continued into the Ching (1644-1911), the last dynasty of imperial China, and a new function of city walls arose under the specific social circumstances of this period. The Manchus, in the wake of their conquest of China in the seventeenth century, were concerned to preserve the ethnic identity and military prowess of their troops stationed at key central places. To this end, they appropriated for exclusive Manchu residence entire sections within the walls of many cities and sometimes built a partial wall to create an enclosed site for a Manchu quarter. In a few instances they built a completely separate enclosure within a short distance of an existing Chinese city. About 34 twin cities were created by the Manchus in North and Northwest China to achieve ethnic segregation (Chang, 1977, 92).

Another type of walls of particular interest here was the ward wall within the city. Since Zhou times (c. 11th century-256 B.C.), a normative principle of city planning had been established both as a symbolic nature and as a pragmatic function of residence control. That is, the city was divided into residential wards, market quarters, and *enceintes* exclusively occupied by local government offices, each being enclosed by walls and separated by streets (Xu, 2000, 163). This system reached its maturity by the Sui (581-618) and the early Tang dynasty (618-907) and had tremendous impacts on daily life in the city. For example, Chang’an, the Sui-Tang capital city, was divided into large enclosed wards by extraordinarily wide streets. Houses of commoners were confined to the interior of the wards, and there were guard posts at the junctions of the avenues (Heng, 1999). Unless a permit was issued by the county officials or the ward headman’s office, no one was allowed out in the avenues at night (*Ibid.*, 24). The main streets were devoid of commercial activities, which were restricted to the city’s fortress-like East and West Markets during certain hours of the day (*Ibid.*).

It was during the late Tang and the early Southern Song period that cities witnessed the beginning of the collapse of the strictly controlled ward system. As the strong, autocratic grip that the Sui emperors had over their capitals was replaced by that of a bureaucratic government of practical scholar-officials, the enclosed marketplaces and the walled residential wards were gradually substituted by the free street plan in which shops could be opened anywhere within the city, and former spatial distinctions of residential, commercial, and administrative functions were blurred (*Ibid.*, 205-07). This period coincided with the early stage of the gradual growth of commercial suburbs outside the city gates caused by the intensification of a market economy, the increase in urbanization, and the slackening of commercial controls and urban regulations. Because city gates channeled all traffic to and from a sector of the city’s hinterland, the areas immediately outside them became favored sites for markets and businesses.

By the nineteenth century, suburban development outside at least one gate was common in many walled cities, and in some cases, built-up areas in the suburbs even exceeded those within the walls (Chang, 1977, 99). Concern for the security of the suburbs sometimes led to the construction of an outer wall which encompassed the entire or partial suburban areas; yet in most cases, no efforts were taken to enclose the commercial suburbs. Quite a few researchers of Chinese history hence maintain that cities in late imperial China were largely open institutions, and the basic political, social, and cultural cleavages, unlike that of the pre-modern European city, were those of class and occupation rather than those between the city and the countryside (Skinner, 1977, 269). As F. W. Mote suggests, “city’s people [during the Ming and Qing dynasty] probably had no sense of themselves as forming a cohesive and self-perpetuating urban group” (Mote, 1973, 54). In his study of Nanjing during the early Ming, Mote considers “Neither the city wall nor the actual limits of the suburban concentration marked the city off from the countryside in architectural terms. Nor did style of dress, patterns of eating and drinking, means of transportation, or any other obvious aspect of daily life display characteristic dichotomies between urban and rural” (Mote, 1977, 116). Such urban-rural continuum was physically manifested in the fact that what was urban was not spatially separated by the city walls from what was rural during the late imperial period.

The Fall of the City Wall

Historically the meanings and functions of the city wall went through various shifts under the tide of social and political transformation. Yet spiritually, the city wall represented for the traditional Chinese what was seen as constant in the vicissitudes of life. In many poems and articles writers portrayed the city wall as part of the timeless universe in contrast to the incessant change of things. In a story told by Tao Qian (ca. A.D. 372-427) in his *Sou shen houji*, for example, when Ding Lingwei, a person who turned into an immortal crane after having studied the *dao* of immortality for a millennium, flew back to his home place and lamented on the transience of human life, he sang that “city walls are as ever but [people] are not the same” (Tao, 1981; Xu, 2000, 126).

This sense of eternity attached to city walls, however, melted into air with the advent of a new socialist era. When the Chinese civil war finally ended in 1949, socialist builders were left with the task of rebuilding the war-ravaged Chinese city into the new city. Although they had no sense of what exactly constituted a socialist urban environment, many agreed that in order to create a world approximating the modern life imagined for the new society, certain traditions had to be overthrown. The argument about the city’s socialist future brought many of the most ostensible vestiges of traditional China under assault. Due to its important role in shaping the urban morphology of the capital, the city wall of Beijing served as the focus in this discussion.

Beijing was a city of walls within walls. There were two parts of city walls: outer walls, the walls of the Chinese City, and inner walls, the walls of the Tartar City; within the inner

walls were the walls of the Imperial City; and finally, within these were the rust-red walls of the Forbidden City. The main city was accommodated within inner walls; initially constructed in the Yuan dynasty and revised in the Ming era. They measured 6,650 meters east-west and 5,350 meters north-south and had nine gates (Sit, 1995). The outer walls were a later addition of the mid 16th century, built to accommodate the prosperous southern commercial suburb. While they should have circumscribed the whole inner city in the original plan, due to a shortage of funds only the southern outer area was enclosed and shaped like a cap adjoining the main city (Ibid.). In the Qing dynasty the conquering Manchus drove most of the native population from the main city into the southern suburb surrounded by outer walls, so the inner city was then commonly known as the Manchu or Tartar city, and the outer city, the Chinese city (Ibid.). The city walls and their attached gate-towers were of massive scale but of flawless proportion. As Osvald Sirén described them in *The Walls and Gates of Peking*:

Of all the great buildings of Peking there is none which can compare with the walls of the Tartar city in monumental grandeur. At first sight they may not be as attractive to the eye as the palaces, temples and shop-fronts of those highly coloured and picturesquely composed wooden structures which still line the old streets or hide behind the walls, but after a longer acquaintance with this vast city, they become the most impressive monuments—enormous in their extension and dominating everything by their quiet forceful rhythm.

...On the outer side of the walls this rhythm is accentuated by the powerful bastions which follow one another at regular intervals though somewhat varying in size. On the inner side the movement is slower and more irregular on account of the extreme unevenness of the joints between the sections and of the bends and bulges resulting from the pressure of water and tree-roots. This slow rhythm is suddenly quickened and changed into a powerful crescendo at the gates, where double towers rise triumphantly above the long horizontal lines of the battlements, the 35 larger of these towers resembling palaces on high terraces. The corner towers, massive and fortresslike, form a magnificent finale of the whole composition (Sirén, 1924, 24-25).

The destruction of the walls, however, already started at the time when Sirén was conducting his research. With the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, Beijing was no longer an imperial capital but the rival ground for political ambitions of warlords. Hence there was no authority to protect its precious legacy. Carved shop-fronts and old-fashioned courtyards were destroyed every year to make room for modern multi-storied brick buildings. A few parts of pink wall around the “Imperial city” were torn down in order to construct electric streetcar lines. Observing these shifts, Sirén asked at the end of his book: “How long will they still remain, these wonderful walls and gates, these silent records of Peking’s most beautiful and glorious past?” (Ibid., 219)

If changes had taken place since the time of the Chinese Republic (1911-49), their pace increased dramatically after the socialist revolution. In 1949, Beijing was made the national capital of a new People’s Republic, and the city government proclaimed the guiding principle for urban construction within the city as “to serve the masses, to serve production and to serve the Central Government” (Sit, 1995, 91). Beijing

entered into an era of rapid development: population and the number of institutions and factories increased rapidly, and the demand for all types of buildings and housing multiplied. While city walls were torn down in cities like Guangzhou during the republic period, Beijing was still very much confined by its walls, which were now considered by many the physical and symbolic barrier to the modernization of the city. As planners were eager to shape the city into a modern socialist capital, how to deal with the city wall became an urgent issue. Greatest divergence came with the issue of whether walls should be demolished or preserved.

One group argued that the city wall should be torn down to make room for both political and economic reasons. For this group of people, ideologically, the city wall was the relic of ancient emperors, the symbol of the “feudalist” tradition, and the sign of the division between urban residents and peasants. As “The Preliminary General Planning Proposal for Beijing Urban Construction (Draft)” stated:

The city of Beijing was built during the Feudal times; its construction was thus limited by the low productive force. Because it was built under the social condition characterized by antithesis between classes, its construction principle was to meet the needs of feudalist rulers. The most important buildings in the city were the palaces and temples; layers of city walls were built centering on the palaces, which reflected the feudal emperors’ overweening idea of protecting feudalist domination and preventing peasant uprising.²

Practically, this group maintained, the city wall was ancient defense work, and it had now finished its “historical task.” In the new age of socialist development, the persistence of walls blocked traffic, limited urban development, and wasted land. Hence it was not only useless but also harmful to keep these walls. If they were torn down, a large amount of bricks could be obtained for new construction projects, the land they occupied could be made into wide streets, and the city was then able to establish an integrated modern transport system.

The other group, however, insisted that it would be a big mistake to demolish the city’s great heritage; they wanted the city wall to be preserved and put into modern use. Various ways of taking advantage of walls were raised: some proposed to build high-speed streetcar system on the walls, some suggested to remodel the gate towers into museums, and others thought to connect city walls and their adjacent areas into greenbelts. The last idea was supported vigorously by architectural historian Liang Sicheng, who wrote extensively on the preservation of Beijing’s cultural legacy during the early 1950s. In his 1950 article entitled “Discussion on the Issue of the Conservation-or-Demolishment of Beijing’s City Walls,” Liang suggested that the city wall and the moat should be redeveloped into a “three-dimensional” park (Liang, 1986). Flowers and grass could be planted on the top of the walls; with a width of more than 10 meters, the terrace would be a perfect place for people to stroll and enjoy a distant view of the city. The dozens of gate towers could be refurbished into reading rooms or teahouses. By diverting water from the Yongding river water into the moat, the latter would allow people to go boating and fishing in the summer, and go skating in the winter (*Ibid.*, 46).

Yet Liang’s proposal, together with his other ideas on historical conservation, was considered nostalgia in the mighty torrent of the socialist development surging forward toward modernity. During an era in which historical materialism achieved its triumph, most decision-makers judged things in accordance with the roles that they played in “the progress of social history.” Thus Hua Nanguai, a key petitioner on many urban construction issues, considered the removal of the city wall inevitable due to “[t]he evolution rule of society.” He maintained that “the yearning for the past cannot prevent the society from making progress” (Hua, 1956). In addition, during the early phase of planning Beijing, the influence of the Soviet model was explicit. Soviet experts were invited to review the plans, and their weight often defeated local attempts at historical conservation. When the general plan of Beijing was drafted in 1953, Liang argued that the administrative center should be put outside the old city to the west of its wall in order to preserve the Imperial City intact, while the Russian experts insisted that time and cost considerations dictated the demolition of old structures in and around the southern part of the Imperial City for the headquarters of the national administration. Apparently the latter’s opinion became dominant; later when the government approved the new general plan “Draft Plan on Reconstructing and Expanding Beijing Municipality,” one of its six planning principles spoke directly against the idea of conservation: “The major danger is an extreme respect for old architecture, such that it constricts our perspective of development” (Sit, 1995, 94).

While hot debates about the city wall still reverberated in the general public, the piecemeal demolition conducted by individual work units had already started due to the constant shortage of construction materials since the early 1950s. As planners continuously raised the magnitude of investment, the gap between the production and consumption of building materials was widened. Construction projects were often interrupted due to inadequate supplies of materials (Chao, 1968). This had made the city walls a desirable source of bricks and earth. In December 1956, for example, Beijing Planning Bureau reported that city walls were excavated by individual work units in a chaotic way: some demolished the inner walls, and some torn down the outer walls. Those who only needed bricks peeled the brick facing off the walls and left the inner earth standing alone, while those who only wanted earth inside the facing left crushed bricks all around.³ The bricks and earth taken by work units were used for all kinds of projects; the Planning Bureau even received requests from some suburban agricultural production co-ops who hoped to use the bricks to build pig houses.⁴

By 1959, the outer walls had almost been completely demolished except the part south to Tiantang, and the inner walls had been partly dismantled. As the brick facing of most parts of the walls was gone, the remaining soil began to wash away in the rain. Under this circumstance, the municipality decided that the remaining city walls should be removed completely.⁵ The city of Beijing has since burst through its walled enclosure and burgeoned outwards in every direction. In the place of the city walls were wide well-paved boulevards.

wards. What remained unchanged were the names of the old city gates, which were now nothing more than the picturesque reminders of a legendary past.

The Rise of the Unit Wall

Ironically, while city walls had been torn down in Beijing, work units were constructing walls throughout the city. In fact, during the 1950s and the early 1960s most work units were built without walls; for those that did need some kind of physical confinement, more often than not only barbed wire entanglements or wattle walls were erected. It was not until the mid-1960s that many work units started to think about building permanent walls. This, however, was not encouraged by the state; in fact, wall-building activity was strictly controlled due to the severe shortage of construction materials. To ensure that major construction projects within the national plan would not be interrupted by inadequate supplies of materials, the planning department kept strict control of the consumption of building materials by minor projects. Considering wall-building as a waste of resources which were already in short supply, the Planning Bureau was generally reluctant to approve work units' wall construction projects except for certain crucial institutions such as military-related research units. The application procedure was made complicated and time-consuming; successful applicants not only had to demonstrate that they had reliable source of the building materials for construction, but were also required to specify why the walls were absolutely necessary.

In order to obtain endorsement, each work unit showed its special prowess. Some stressed that they would use construction materials with substandard quality or made of waste materials. According to a 1964 document, for example, in order to build walls with a length of 850 meters the College of Nationality claimed that it had made coal cinder bricks for the construction.⁶ Because the brick was one of the construction materials that were in constant short supply, quite a few applications proposed to build metal-railing fences rather than brick walls. In early May of the same year, for instance, the municipal government of Beijing issued a circular which required that no brick walls should be constructed; in response to this constraint, some work units requested to build fences instead.⁷

Despite the strict control of the planning department and the municipal government, work units were nonetheless eager to build walls. During the short period of time between May 22 and July 23 of 1964 alone, 51 local work units submitted wall construction applications to the Planning Bureau of Beijing.⁸ The main reason for this wall-building enthusiasm was the security concern. The report submitted by the Chinese Scientific Council, for example, described the difficulties in maintaining safety in its residential district without walls:

Because there are no walls, it is impossible to manage. Accesses are available in all directions, people are free to come and go, and vendors are hawking everywhere. This has not only been disturbing, but has also made security a big issue. According to an incomplete estimation, there were 11 cases of burglary in 1963, among which there were seven cases of bicycle stealing and four other cases.⁹

Most newly established work units at the time were located in suburban areas; there always was a tension between the units and the peasants. Without other means available, unit leaders considered the wall separating their territories completely from the rural hinterlands the only solution to solve the contradiction. According to the application submitted by Miyun Water Electronic Power Factory in 1964, for example, peasants not only herded pigs and sheep in the factory's office and residential areas, but they also developed family vegetable plots within the unit.¹⁰ Another application submitted by the Fifth Branch of the Automobile Repairing Factory detailed the conflicts between the unit and nearby peasants.¹¹ Located on the old site of the Shiye Timber Factory, the factory was sandwiched between two residential districts, while bordering the Sun Palace People's Commune on another side. Factory leaders complained that because of the ineffective management of the previous tenant, residents in the vicinity developed a habit of coming to the factory to pick up leftover materials. When the factory tried to stop the practice, the mass became angry and spread complaints everywhere. In addition, while the previous tenant allowed more than 300 households in the vicinity to share electricity, the factory decided to cut off the supply. The sudden power failure caused great "misunderstanding" from locals. In two occasions, hundreds of people gathered in the factory and protested. The crises were solved only with the assistance of the Public Security Bureau and the Electricity Provision Bureau, but the relationship between the factory and local residents had since broken up. Later, when unit leaders decided to build a new power distribution house on the roadside, they considered that building walls would be the only way to protect factory property.¹²

Second to the security function, unit walls played an important role in defining boundaries. In particular, this purpose had to do with a specific urban land property-right system adopted in China that was not ordinarily found in a market economy. Soon after the founding of the People's Republic, most urban land under the ownership of the former Kuomintang government, foreigners, and some large private landowners was confiscated by the state (Yang et al., 1992). Socialist reform of private industrialists and businessmen launched in 1956 further changed the ownership of private real estate by means of "joint state-private ownership" and by state management of leases. By 1958, the bulk of urban land was converted to state ownership, and land profit and land rent had disappeared from the Chinese economy (*Ibid.*)

However, while it was clear that urban land in China belonged to the state, what remained vague was the relationship between the state and the urban land user. Whether the requisitioned land had actually turned into the property of the urban land user (hence the state provided only a permit for land requisition) or the property of the state (hence the urban land user obtained only the land use right) was never clarified in government documents or theoretical writings. In reality, the principle was "those who used the land would man-age the land," but there was no clear legal protection for users' right. As a result, although there was no time limit set for the land use of work units, the state might take back the

land anytime. During the 1950s, for example, because the General Institute of Iron and Steel Research needed expansion, the state required its neighboring work unit, the Institute of Agricultural Scientific Research, to yield its experimental farmland to the former. As it took several years to build up that farmland, the transaction caused a great loss for the latter.¹³ Without law protection, walls became important in safeguarding land use rights through their very physicality. In fact, to avoid waste, once the walls were there, the Planning Bureau often hesitated to order demolition and was thus forced to admit the “established fact” of property rights.

In addition, the limited power of work units in the formal process of land disposition made wall-building a desirable way to acquire additional land. Because they did not have to pay for land use, work units were inclined to occupy more land. In fact, since the early 1950s the state had expressed greatly concern towards the misuse of land resources among work units. In the document “On the Situation of Wasting Construction Land,” for example, the Beijing Planning Bureau reported that in 1955 land that had been distributed to individual work units while not in use reached 10,160 acres, which accounted for 9.6 percent of the total acquired land since 1949, and this did not include the land that was used improperly.¹⁴ A survey of 39 work units in May 1955 estimated that misused land reached 7,600 acres, which was approximately half of the total land occupied by the work units under survey. The serious situation of land waste and misuse raised great alert within the central government; *People's Daily*, the official newspaper, published a dozen of articles related to the issue in 1957 alone.¹⁵

While it was always desirable to acquire as much land as possible, work units generally had little say in the urban land disposition process. Without market mechanism, land disposition was largely an administrative allocation process under the general investment plan. When an investment plan was approved, the application for land use was simultaneously approved; the state determined land allocation by using a ratio between the construction project and its land use acreage. In this disposition process the government played a determining role, while the direct users of land had little influence. Once a work unit was set up, even if the unit had the incentive to expand its production capacity, therefore generating a new demand for land, it could not acquire land freely. In most cases, only those whose new production investment plans were approved would be allowed to acquire additional land (Yang, 1992).

Under this circumstance, constructing walls beyond the given planning redline often became a preferable way to occupy more land. The document reporting the survey of wall construction by Beijing middle and elementary schools detailed the situation.¹⁶ In 1964 the Planning Bureau approved a total of 105 wall construction projects for middle and elementary schools for security purpose. Among 73 projects that had been completed, the Planning Bureau found that in 33 projects the location of walls exceeded the given boundaries. The walls constructed by the Attached Middle School of Beijing University, for example, had exceeded the scope of land distribution on its east, south, and west sides,

and its north wall, if built according to the unit's construction plan, would circle the six acres of agricultural fields that belonged to the neighboring Dazhongsi Production Team.

As unit wall construction was gradually established as a norm, the wall has become the most essential physical part of Chinese employment. When a new work unit is built, the wall is the first structure in construction. Every work unit is a walled enclosure or, if large enough, a cluster of several walled enclosures. The wall, in most cases made of brick ranging from two to three meters height, sets the work unit physically apart from its surroundings. There are usually several entrances on the wall from the main road, each of which is staffed by security personnel and equipped with heavy wrought-iron gates. A small janitor's room is flanked on one side of the gate; with a large window facing the gate, the guard can easily watch the coming and going of pedestrians and vehicles from the room. The level of control of entrance varies from unit to unit. Some institutions, such as the major administrative and military-related units, may subject all persons to identification procedures. Others are relatively easy to enter; only those apparently not belonging to the work unit would be stopped by the guard, who is often shrewd at evaluating pedestrians' status by their looking and manners, for an identity check-up. The gate is closed at midnight and open in early morning. Once it is closed, the entrance and exit for both unit residents and outsiders become very difficult. Access can only be obtained by waking the guard up and the latter would only open the door, apparently unhappily, for those who he recognizes as unit members.

Like other architectural elements, the wall has rich sociological implications beyond its purely physical property. For some it has a pivotal role as the very originator of domesticity and society. L.B. Alberti, for example, claims in his *On the Art of Building in Ten Books* that it was the roof and the wall which first drew men together and gave rise to society (Alberti, 1988). But for people who are excluded from the wall's confinement, the wall has a sinister parallel in the attempts to divide people. The unit wall indeed bears both effects. On the one hand, the wall, with its controlled accesses and related buildings facing inward, helps to create a close community atmosphere within the unit. On the other hand, the wall serves to prevent outsiders from taking advantage of social facilities and other properties of the work unit. The segregation effect is most striking in the case of the work unit located in the countryside, where the well-equipped unit space is surrounded by rural hinterlands which barely have any modern utilities and social facilities. As local peasants desire to use the services available in the work unit but are denied the accesses, conflicts, sometimes violent ones, are often generated from the encounters between the two (Lu, 2003).

Conclusion

As we have seen, the persistence of the “wall” as a building typology was not simply a result of the “handed-down” convention. Instead, the tradition was initially condemned by the planning department as wasteful and

unnecessary; its persistence was a result of returning after being repressed rather than that of continuity. My study highlights two major reasons behind the construction of unit walls: one was a safekeeping issue in conflicts with neighbors, and the other was a property security issue in conflicts with the government. Most newly established work units were located in suburban or rural areas, the conflict over safety between the work units and peasants drove the work units to build walls to separate themselves from the rural hinterlands. Because the relationship between the state and the urban land user was vaguely defined and there was no clear legal protection for land right, wall construction not only played an important role in securing the land use rights, but also became a preferable way to occupy more land.

The wall-building practice hence revived; whereas the Chinese city as a whole was no longer walled, it achieved a geography consisting of many close units circled by walls. At first glance, this cellular landscape bore certain similarities to that of Sui-Tang cities. With walled wards turning themselves off from the street, both were very much like a collection of semi-autonomous cells separated by wide avenues traversing between the high walls. Yet a closer look into the process of the construction of the unit wall reveals that the enclosure of the work unit was not a sign of the revival of tradition or an immediate application of the long-established practice; instead, as my study reveals, it was born out of a series of peculiar contradictions generated by new socialist conditions. If in the *traditional* definition of tradition is “the transmitted thing,” this wall story, however, reveals that the past, rather than simply being passed on, is ceaselessly restructured in the course of making the present. Tradition is a product of the ongoing process of deconstruction and reconstruction, and it travels by returning at the new site after being repressed at another.

Behind this shift from the “city wall” to the “unit wall” as the framework of defining the Chinese landscape was a new set of associated regimes of power. While from the very beginning the state assumed the responsibility of feeding the unemployed and providing full welfare for the urban population, rural residents were responsible for feeding themselves and practiced self-reliance in every aspect of their lives. The enlarged gap between the city and the countryside was immediately sensed; many cities were swollen with rural migrants during the 1950s. In order to maintain a neat socialist urban order devoid of any city ills such as unemployment and hunger, controls were taken step by step to block the “blind” influx of rural people into the city. A full-blown population regulation system came into being in 1958, when migration was moving towards its peak at the height of the Great Leap Forward (Cheng and Selden, 1994). The 1958 document, “Regulations on Household Registration in the People’s Republic of China,” formally established a *hukou* (household) system which divided the whole population into two groups—urban and rural residents—based on whether they were members of work units or their place of residence (*Ibid.*). Once classified, membership in either group was inherited from the mother and could not be changed except under special circumstances. The division, together with

comprehensive policies on employment, transport and food and housing supply, served to constrain people to their current places of residence.

The result is a rigid, hierarchically segregated landscape. During the Maoist period (1949-76), individuals and families were either born into or bureaucratically allocated to relatively closed units; there was little free movement of people and information across unit boundaries. The units were highly differentiated in terms of material conditions, income, services and opportunities based on their locations in the bureaucratic system (Whyte, 2000). In particular, the contrast between the urban and rural units was striking. Urban work units featured paved streets, modern concrete buildings, electricity, running water, sewage systems, and a wide range of social facilities. Unit members were guaranteed a variety of provisions, including permanent employment, retirement pension, public housing, and inexpensive medical care, and so on. In rural villages, residents still lived in wooden or traditional earth dwellings, where infrastructure and social service system were extremely primitive. Peasants were excluded from social benefits urban residents enjoyed even if they managed to leave the countryside and began to reside in the city. In a subtle way, the unit wall had an effect of legitimizing the differentiation. If the urban and rural worlds were juxtaposed side by side without the walls, it would be surprising to see the striking difference between the two. Yet with the mediate of the walls, it was much easier for one to accept the dissimilarities and to take them as something natural and eternal.

There is indeed more than a little irony in this transition: while the city wall was charged as a symbol of the urban-rural contradiction in state condemnation, in fact during the late imperial period what was urban was not spatially separated by the city wall from what was rural; the city at the time, different from the pre-modern European city, was an “open institution.” Such a tradition, however, disappeared ironically at a time when the urban-rural inequality was considered one of the social ills to be eliminated by socialism. It turned out that the unit wall was both the product of and the symbol for the division between the work unit and its surroundings. In particular, in the case of the work unit located in the countryside, the unit wall came to represent a strict segregation between the urban and the rural. Hence in the end, what was ended, in addition to the era of the city wall, was the era of urban-rural continuum.

ENDNOTES

1. This article is a revised version of the chapter “From the City Wall to the Unit Wall” in my dissertation *The Spatial Unconscious: Modernity and the Making of the Chinese Work Unit, 1949-2000*. The research was supported by Social Science Research Council International Dissertation Field Research Fellowship, U.C. Berkeley Humanities Research Grant, and U.C. Berkeley Chancellor’s Fellowship for Dissertation Research.
2. “Beijing chengshi jianshe zongti guihua chubu fang’an (chao’an)” [The Preliminary General Planning Proposal for Beijing Urban Construction (Draft)], Beijing Municipal Archives, Category No. 131, Content No. 1, Vol. 56.

3. "Guanyu chengqiang chaichu wenti de qingshi" [Petition on the Issue of Demolishing City Walls], Beijing Municipal Archives, Category 131, No. 1, Vol. 271.
4. "Guihua ju guanyu weixian bufeng chengqiang chaichu de yijian" [The Planning Bureau's Opinion on the Demolishment of Some Dangerous City Walls], Beijing Municipal Archives, Category 131, No. 1, Vol. 271.
5. Ibid.
6. "Guanyu jianshe danwei xiujian weiqiang wenti gei chengjianwei de qingshi baogao" [Report to the Committee of Urban Construction on the Issue of Wall Construction by Work Units], Beijing Municipal Archives, Category 131, No. 1, Vol. 491.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Interview with a member of the General Institute of Iron and Steel Research in Beijing, 2000.
14. "Guanyu jianzhu yongdi de langfei qingkuang" [On the Situation of the Waste in Construction Land], Beijing Municipal Archives, Category 131, No. 1, Vol. 244.
15. For example, "Zai jiben jianshe zhong jieyue yongdi" [Save on Land in Basic Construction], Renmin Ribao [People's Daily], Mar. 31, 1957, B1; "Jieyue jiben jianshe yongdi" [Save on the Basic Construction], Land, Renmin Ribao [People's Daily], Aug. 6, 1957.
16. "Guanyu jianshe danwei xiujian weiqiang wenti gei chengjianwei de qingshi baogao" [Report to the Committee of Urban Construction on the Issue of Wall Construction by Work Units], Beijing Municipal Archives, Category 131, No. 1, Vol. 491.

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