

The Enriched Field Urbanising the Central Plains of China

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the spatial transformations occurring in the Central Plains of China, Henan Province. Like most of the territory of inland China, the Central Plains used to be largely characterized by minor agglomerations built over a long period of time and made of small-scale infrastructures that supported a diffuse urbanisation. In the last three decades this has changed radically: the Central Plains have become the new frontier of Chinese urbanisation, a test-bed for new policies and spatial development such as the ones recently enacted by central and local governments, to promote more co-ordinated urban development. As a result, the Central Plains is now a regional-level urban agglomeration, the so-called Zhongyuan City Group, made up of nine prefecture-level cities, 23 cities and 413 townships, that produces 3.06 percent of China's GDP and is home to 45.5 million inhabitants (3.39 percent of the population of China) of which 30 percent (13.7 million) are considered 'urban population'. In this area of 58,400 square kilometres, the current policies aim to urbanize 4,902 square kilometres to host new inhabitants, new economies and to promote new ways of living and social constructions.

In spite of this expansion, the Central Plains are still a little studied field for research, and only in recent years have they come to the attention of scholars. As with most of the research on the Chinese city, these recent studies commonly attempt to fit the specificities observed into the extensive and generic framework of Chinese urbanisation. This framework is generally based on research that focuses on non-spatial features, and it mostly concerns socio-economic and urban policies related to demographic trends. The physical space is given little importance in the main debate and, if taken into consideration, is treated merely in quantitative terms (since it is considered by many as a banal space: the product of developers blueprinting the transnational models of a globalized society). On the contrary, the hypothesis of this research is that it is not possible to consider Chinese urbanisation as an 'above groundness' phenomenon, which only affects the socio-economic sphere because of quantities and ready-made imaginaries. The emerging physical space matters: it

is a reflection of socio-economic trends, political ambitions and cultural values that are shaping new modes of living, constructing, occupying and consuming the land. Therefore, as a means of gaining greater insight into the process of urbanisation in China, this dissertation provides an interpretation based on detailed descriptions that explain the relationship between the current policies, economies and societies, and the transformations affecting the physical space. As with all interpretations, it cannot be considered neutral. It accentuates some topics and themes, and requires further understandings and investigations. In spite of this, it seeks to set out an argument to open up further reflections on what Chinese urbanisation entails for the contemporary city, and more in general, for our way of constructing, living and perceiving it.

The research is organized into three sections. In the first, I set out a theoretical framework for examining the urban transformations in the Central Plains of China. This theoretical framework is based on narrative descriptions and territorial interpretations that have been developed by scholars to elucidate the relations between physical spaces and urbanisation processes occurring worldwide over the last fifty years. In particular, I focus on how three specific processes of urbanisation have been interpreted: the suburbanisation that characterised the middle landscape in North America, urban diffusion in the European setting, and the contemporary logistic and infrastructural spaces worldwide. In the second section, I investigate the urban transformations of the Central Plains of China by inquiring into the past urban conditions, their current state and the ongoing transformations. The purpose is to understand how policies, socio-economic trends, plans and projects of the last century have affected the space observed. Finally, in the third section, I examine the current configuration of the Central Plains; this is based on an empirical study carried out during three periods of field research in China. During these periods, I investigated several areas of the Central Plains and I provide critical re-interpretations of the phenomena observed as representations that provide valuable information about ways of living, using and modifying spaces.

Based on the above investigations, I conclude that the Central Plains of China may be read as an enriched field, where the term enrichment refers to an attempt to improve and enhance spaces not only in terms of their performances but also by associating them with tales. In this way, the Central Plains of China can be seen as a space in which infrastructures operate not only to organize and to equip the land, but also to promote the story of ‘a good environment’ to come; where most of the artefacts not only fulfill their basic functions, but also brand the space and ensure the quality of everyday life through the continuous recall of the past and tradition; finally, a place in which productive sites enrich the land with symbols, meanings and happy endings. Within this framework, I argue that the ongoing transformations are guided by a project, which, rather than exalting the disruptions, is an instrument through which discontinuity and disconnections are concealed and interiorized in an ordinary tale subsuming the past and promoting the future while enhancing the idea of a continuous present redacted of any conflict and violence.