The conservation of Beijing Central Axis under the perspective of Historic Urban Landscape: rethinking the existing urban conservation system

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The «Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape» (2011) was passed on the 36th UNESCO General Conference in October 2011. It stressed that HUL was not a new type of heritage, but an innovative method in urban heritage conservation and sustainable management. Since then, some issues on the concept and approach of HUL have raised wide discussion in the field of urban conservation in China. This paper takes the case of Beijing Central Axis (an urban heritage site in the latest World Heritage tentative list, BCA) as an example, comparing the existing urban heritage strategies in Beijing with the concept of HUL, in order to share the understanding on HUL from China today’s conservation practices.

1. The understanding of HUL and its application on Beijing Central Axis

In the «Recommendation on HUL», the concept of HUL was defined as ‘a landscape approach for identifying, conserving and managing historic areas within their broader urban contexts’. The term ‘HUL’ is a compound phase that should be studied on the multidisciplinary theory progress of ‘(cultural) landscape’, ‘historic landscape’ and ‘urban landscape’. It concerns the wide theoretical research of cultural geography from C. Sauer, J.B.Jackson to the new cultural geographers of 1980s and 1990s, the work of W.G. Hoskins and the development of landscape archaeology, the urban morphology study on townscape of M.R.G. Conzen and ‘the movement of townscape’ of G.Cullen, K. Lynch, C. Norberg-Schulz etc.

The term ‘landscape’ which is not only referred to the physical object but also indicates ways of perspective, is the key to interpret HUL. In this way, HUL implies a way of thinking and practice other than any specific visual images or specific heritage attributes. Neither does the term ‘historic’ imply any restricted time period, but focuses on the time-depth of landscape evolving process and the influence of historic landscape on today. The ‘urban landscape’ with a wider dimension than townscape, cares about the collection of various attributes within an urban area, its inter-relationships and the significant economic, social and cultural forces.

In urban heritage conservation, a landscape approach concerns about a broader geographical and cultural context. It emphasizes: 1) the urban heritage spatial system, which means the inter-relationships among physical forms, the spatial organization, land-use pattern, natural features and settings are more important than one single monument; 2) the inter-action between the urban places with local community, thus involves their long-term social, cultural, eco-
nomic values and activities; 3) the time-depth of landscape which requires an overall analysis on the historic layering of diverse values or attributes in urban development.

In the case of BCA, it is an urban landscape complex exemplified by its meticulously planned spatial organization, extending 7.8 km in Beijing old city and developed almost in the same pace with the city. For centuries, it serves as a control power for the city development that most of the significant monuments and historic places in Beijing were constructed in accordance with it. However, because of its large-scale and the close link with ancient Chinese urban planning philosophy, the nomination and conservation of BCA under the World Heritage criteria urgently need a new method which might be improved by the approach of HUL.

From the perspective of HUL, firstly, the value of BCA should be considered from the context of regional geography and the traditional Chinese urban planning philosophy. Secondly, BCA is not a group of buildings, but a complex ensemble of historic buildings, historic streets, urban places, lake system and its settings with close inter-relationships. The identification of heritage attributes should not only emphasize the ancient monuments, but stress all properties of successive evolving processes. Thirdly, the conservation BCA should not be limited to the physical forms of urban heritage, but emphasize: the relationships between built heritage and the surrounding environment; the height control and maintenance of historic areas; the systematically preservation and regeneration of various spatial feelings; the sustaining of long-term land use pattern and cultural places.

2. The value of Beijing Central Axis from the view of HUL
The «Recommendation on HUL» acknowledges the close connection between the values of urban heritage and the cultural context, especially the social and cultural practices that successively shaped the heritage. It also suggests
the member states ‘should integrate urban heritage conservation strategies into national development policies and agendas according to the historic urban landscape approach. Thus, when considering the values of BCA, our vision should not be limited to the city of Beijing, but reach the regional range of east China. Meanwhile, our assessment should also base on a deep understanding on the traditional worldview of human and nature, such as the ancient philosophy of ‘Regarding Centre as [Place] for Respect’ and the urban planning theories of capital city.

2.1. An evaluation from the view on the regional geography of China
Thinking the values of Beijing Central Axis should start from the location of Beijing, and its relations with the Central Axis of the Country. In traditional Chinese culture and political systems, ideas like ‘Regarding Centre as [Place] for Respect’ took a prominent position. Since the Zhou dynasty, Chinese emperors always considered themselves as descendants of heaven, their countries as the centre of the universe, and their capital city had to be at the very centre of the country. There are numerous sayings that elaborate upon this opinion: “The King must be in the centre of the universe, which is [according to] ‘Li’ (Wang’zhe bi’ju tian’xia zhi’zhong, li’ye)”.

From Song Dynasty onwards, with the rise of ‘CHENG and ZHU’s Neo-Confucianism’, an ideal model of the axis of China was formed and proposed by Zhu Xi (the great Southern Song Neo-Confucian scholar). The axis was composed by the great mountains in the east area of China and Beijing was located right in the center of this axis, a perfect location for the capital representing the idea of being “centre of the heaven and earth”. In Ming dynasty, philosopher ‘Zhang Huang’ made more accurate analysis on the country axis of China, adjusting the ideal mapping to the real geography location. The axis starts from the ‘Tain’shou’ mountain in the north, passes through the Tai Mountain and mountains of ‘Huai’nan’, reaches to the south with the mountains in ‘Jiang Nan’. Beijing still sits in this country axis and was deemed as the center. Thus, the design of BCA became a miniature of the ideal country axis and an accurate expression of the emperor to be in the “center of heaven and earth”. In this way, the axis integrated the capital city with the great mountains and two rivers of China into one entire ensemble reflecting the traditional Chinese worldview of the connections between the heaven and human being’s world.

2.2. Thinking the values in the context of Chinese traditional urban planning theory
The ideas behind the construction of BCA are inseparable from two of most influential traditional theories on urban planning in China. One is the ideal capital city model written in the chapters of ‘Jiang’ren ying’guo (Craftsmen Constructing the State)’ in ‘Zhou’li Kao’gong Ji’ (Records of Craftsmen of Zhou Rituals) during the Spring and Autumn Period. It was illustrated that: “When building a state capital, (the crafts) creates a square (city) of nine li (length dimension) each side with three gates on every edge. In the city, there are nine north-south avenues and nine east west streets. The avenues are nine carriage tracks wide. On the left (east side of city) is the ancestral temple and
Fig.3 - The heritage attributes of Beijing Central Axis and the urban planning of Beijing old city; Fig.4 - The "Market" and residential area in BCA: a typical civil life image of Old Beijing

to the right (west side) is the altar of land and grain. In the front (north of city) is the court palace and the behind (south of city) is the market.” This is a wide influential definition of a well-controlled capital for the emperor that had been followed by various ancient Chinese capital cities, from ‘Chang’an’ in the Han dynasty to Beijing.

Beijing Central Axis is strictly in accordance with these principles. When built ‘Da Du’ city in Yuan dynasty, the city shape was well organized to a standardized square. The center of the square, which now is the location of ‘Wan’ning’ bridge, was the north end of BCA. The Forbidden City, the residence of the imperial families, is located on the axis and is completely symmetrical to the axis. The temple of ancestors on the left (of the imperial palace), the alter of land and grain on the right are in front of (south) the imperial palaces, while the market area (the place for civilians) is in the back (north).

The other urban planning theory was proposed by ‘Guan Zi’, a book collecting various philosophy ideas in the Spring and Autumn period. ‘Guan Zi’ put forward that the city planning should be in accordance with the natural environment, the population and other practical conditions of the city. Since the Yuan dynasty was established by nomadic tribes who were fond of building the settlement near the lake. The location of BCA also considered the relationship with the water system in Beijing. It is right next to the six lakes in Beijing; the lakes are further linked with the wider river system in the southwest and northeast of Beijing. Thus, BCA is a compact ensemble expressing an humble attitude to respect the existing natural environment.

2.3. The values of Beijing Central Axis

As the core of Beijing old city, BCA is a representative miniature of the idea of being in the center of the world; and is close related to the land planning of
east China, integrating the Great mountains and rivers into one entirety. The axis expresses the traditional Chinese ideology of ‘Li’zhi’ and the worldview of human’s relationship with the nature.

Beijing Central Axis is constructed under careful urban planning and goes through almost eight centuries of constant evolution. It is a representative example based on a set of urban planning theories in ancient China: the ideal capital model proposed by ‘Zhou’li Kao’gong Ji’ in Zhou dynasty, the principles of ‘Guan Zi’ in the Spring and Autumn period. It is also the longest and best preserved historic capital city axis in China which still has significant influence on today’s city development.

3. The identification of Beijing Central Axis heritage attributes

BCA is one unique urban complex exemplified by the meticulously planned location, intact spatial layout, various land use and distinguishable characteristic. Thus, more comprehensive urban heritage components can be identified other than groups of historic buildings so as to support the cultural values.

3.1. The urban spatial system of BCA: topography and hydrology features; urban pattern; public infrastructures; well preserved historic buildings; visual relationships

The location of BCA had a close relation with the topography and hydrology features of Beijing which are composed by the mountains in the north-west, ‘Wen’yu’ River in the north-east, the ‘Yong’ding’ River in the south-west area of the Beijing, and the ‘six lakes’ area right to the west of the axis. The topography and hydrology features of Beijing are an important environment for BCA, while the ‘six lakes’ areas should become part of the property area so as to maintain the integrity of the site.

The urban pattern and public infrastructures of BCA build up the most remarkable morphological character of Beijing old city. They are composed by the ‘Yong’ding’ Gate at the south end; the temple of aргriculture to the west and the temple of heaven to the east; the ‘Da Zha’lan’ commercial street with ‘Zheng’yang’ Gate at its north end; the ‘Tian’an’men’ square, the forbidden city and mountain Jing as the central section; the altar of land and grain and the temple of ancestor on each side; the street of ‘Di’an’men’ and the tower of drum and bell at the north end. This complicated urban pattern under a cautious design all coordinate with the instruction of the ideal capital city model that one can easily observe the visual, functional, morphological and dimensional relationships in its system.

3.2. The historic layers of urban evolution from Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties, to the Republic of China and People’s Republic of China

One of the main characters of BCA is that it is a dynamic complex that has been changing with the social transformation for almost eight hundred years, adapting to the evolving needs of different generations. The existing BCA has been gone through three stages of development: the establishment in the Yuan Dynasty, the perfection in the Ming Dynasty and the renewal after 1911. The north end of the BCA is connected with the beginning of Beijing old city.
The location of today’s drum tower is quite adjacent to the ‘Central Pavilion’ of Yuan dynasty which was planned as the center of the city. Though the pavilion was demolished during the Ming dynasty, the ‘Wan’ning’ bridge which was built in Yuan is well preserved to nowadays indicated the continuity of BCA during Yuan and Ming. In the Ming dynasty, BCA was been altered gradually by the development of Beijing old city: the southward shift of the city (1368-1416); the reconstruction of public infrastructures and spatial formation of the urban pattern (1416-1553); the addition of Outer City, the south extension of central axis (1553-1635). Till the end of this process, the main section of BCA which is 7.8 km in length had been completed. Later in Qing dynasty, there was no fundamental renewal on the urban pattern, only some infrastructures were partially altered such as the Forbidden City or the temple of heaven etc. After 1911, when ‘Xin’hai’ Revolution shook the foundation of the Chinese feudal autocratic system, the collapse of the empire with its great transformations on social institutions and economic structures ultimately affected the urban patterns of BCA. A significant example of the urban regeneration in this period was that most of the imperial infrastructures, such as the Forbidden City, temples and alters that originally used by royal families, had been transformed into public use. During 1920s to 1930s, a series of demolishing projects were accomplished for the need of transportation, for instance, the east and west Qian’bu Corridors, located north of the Da’qing Gate were replaced by Tian Avenue (Tian’an’men Avenue). And later when the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, the construction of Tian’an’men Square took place right in the center of BCA, forming a new political symbol for the country.

As stated above, when we determine the composition of BCA urban heritage, all its historic layers reflecting the values should be taken into consideration. Though in the 20th century, part of the historic pattern of the axis had been replaced during the process of urban renewal, these projects had become part of the history. They represent a strong ideology of that specific historical period and follow the planning principles that had already been established by central axis.

3.3. Traditional land use and culture places: typical land use areas revealing traditional urban life; the cultural places with important morphological importance or related with historical events.

The HUL approach emphasizes the associative cultural values and intangible heritages, therefore, we could not just take Beijing Central Axis as an ensemble of historic buildings, plazas and streets, but a linear cultural places with diverse land use. From this perspective, BCA could be divided into four various urban landscape areas. The first area from Yongding Gate in the south to Zheng’yang Gate is the place of worship outside of Forbidden City. The second one which is from Zheng’yang Gate to Tian’an’men Square is the modern political center associated with several important revolution movements in the 20th century. The third area that starts from Forbidden City to Jing Mountain are the imperial “Halls and Palaces”, including the three lakes to its west. Though this ‘forbidden area’ has been changed to public use, it is still an essential area in Beijing to exhibit the history of imperial governance.
Fig.5 - The historic layers of Beijing Central Axis

The fourth area is the “Market” and residential area, including the Drum Tower, Bell Tower, Nan’luo’gu lane, ‘Inclining Yan’dai’ street, and the other three lakes. As the best preserved residential area in Beijing old city, it is given a unique character by the beautiful lake view. In short, these four areas make up a representative picture scroll of Beijing Urban ‘Landscape’, presenting the vicissitudes about the city and people.

4. The strategies for Beijing Central Axis sustainable management from the perspective of HUL


For the aspects of city spatial structures, «The master plan of Beijing (2004-2020)» indicated that the BCA should be extended in both directions. The urban pattern of BCA was respected and strengthened by the Olympic Park of 2008 in the north, while in the south by the Nan’yuan residential area. «The conservation plan for the historic city of Beijing» (2002) the plan assessed the existing condition of historic water system, and determined to maintain the existing moat system; and to restore part of the historic rivers, so as to improve the recycle of historic water system. This plan also classified the visual relationships into two categories: the overall panoramas and the pedestrian views from specific roads. It then strengthened the height control require-
ments of new constructions in the historic areas in order to better preserve the seven perspective lines.

«The Conservation planning of historic areas in Beijing old city» (2001) and «The conservation plan for the imperial city of Beijing» (2003) focus on the historic area conservation. These two plans identified 30 historic areas and made specific protection regulations based on the conditions of traditional buildings emphasizing the strategies, such as: the preservation of existing urban context; the improvement of the current traffic, infrastructure and living conditions. For a more general protection measures on the historic area, height control requirement is still the most common and the only legal tool. «Management Regulations of Beijing on cultural relic conservation zone and built control zone» (1994) and «The conservation plan for the historic city of Beijing» (2002) both divided the old imperial city into several areas of specific height limits. «Management Regulations» (1994) concerned about the built control areas of the historic relics, and classified the requirements into five types. Type I is no construction area; type II is one floor high area; type III is the area of building height less than 9m; type IV is the area of building height less than 18m; type V is the built control area with special requirements. «The conservation plan for the historic city of Beijing» (2002) cared about the other areas in old Beijing which should not extend 30m, most part is limited to 18-24m.

If comparing the existing urban planning strategies with the HUL approaches which provided a more integrated view on the values, property composition of BCA, and some omissions will be acknowledged. The approved planning measures still focus on the physical form of each individual heritage; therefore to some extent they ignore the connections among different properties or areas as a whole; the importance of traditional land-use; the morphological value of historic urban pattern and the vital cultural places linking the physical heritage with its community. Therefore, the following suggestions need to be paid more attention so as to improve the conservation system of BCA:

- An regional spatial plan on the historic topological or hydrology environment of BCA, not only the features in Beijing, but also the mountains and rivers supporting the ideal model of the axis of China. Its maintenance and sustainable development need consistent effort of sectorial cooperation and more survey of archaeological experts.
- The guidance on the historic road renewal project which aims at balancing the need of efficient transportation system and the conservation of urban patterns.
- The rigid height control should be replenished by the morphological guidance on new construction or historic building renewal in the buffer zone of BCA in order to maintain and enhance the visual relationship.
- More guidance of urban design on preserving the characters and feeling of the cultural place will be helpful, these characters may include the order and continuity of the space in BCA, the sustainability of the traditional land use, intangible heritages and etc.
- The cultural places should be open for the public in order to create more opportunities for public participation.
5. Conclusion: the concept of HUL and its application on Beijing Central Axis

In the urban conservation field of China, some experts believe that the 30-years practice of historic and cultural city (and village) conservation in China (1992-2012) shares some similar principles with HUL approach: both try to quest an integrated approach for urban conservation; both emphasize the importance of traditional land use, visual relationships and etc. However, in the case of BCA, the HUL approach provides us a wider and more inter-related perspective to consider the values and the structure of this urban site, the relationship of the site with its geographical, social and cultural context. Therefore, a new frame of time and space to identify the heritage attributes can be built, and the conservation BCA concerns with a more creative sustainable development of Beijing old city, even the overall management of the cultural and natural heritage of East China.

Notes
1 ‘Li’, the ritual system, or the so-called ‘li’zhi’, is an ideological system in traditional Chinese culture on the order and hierarchies of an ideal society, being in the centre on the relationships between heaven and humans, social hierarchies and classes, social ethics and code of conduct. In its long history, it promoted a long lasting harmonious social order by arranging the emperors, officials and masses’ activities and maintaining their locations in the social structure.

References
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