

# ROLE OF PUBLIC SPACES BETWEEN BUILT HERITAGE AND LIVING CITY: THE CASE OF CHANGLE GATE IN ZHENGDING, CHINA

Qian Liu <sup>1</sup>, Laura Pezzetti <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Architecture, Built Environment and Construction Engineering, Politecnico di Milano

## 1. Public space in historic cities

Public spaces are ‘stages upon which the drama of communal life unfolds’ (Carr et al., 1992). They stimulate communication and integration among people of different social classes and groups. Their interaction with public life help establish connections between human beings and the urban environment. Thus, public spaces are endowed with cultural and emotional meanings, becoming the essential element of shaping and manifesting local identity (Čamprag, 2017).

In historic cities, public spaces support memories and stimulate contemporary urban life, which is crucial to perceiving and enjoying the historic urban landscape (Pezzetti, 2019). Public spaces and built heritage in the layered morphology of historic cities together form ‘a correlated entirety that can be read and designed as a unique palimpsest’ (Pezzetti, 2017), providing opportunities for contemporary interventions. Such interventions are always subject to two extremes: one is the continuity that preservation imposes, and the other is the necessary changes as responses to development (Čamprag, 2017). Interventions compromising between these two extremes inevitably involve a voluntary ‘filtering’ of the historic city, powered by various agendas and interests.

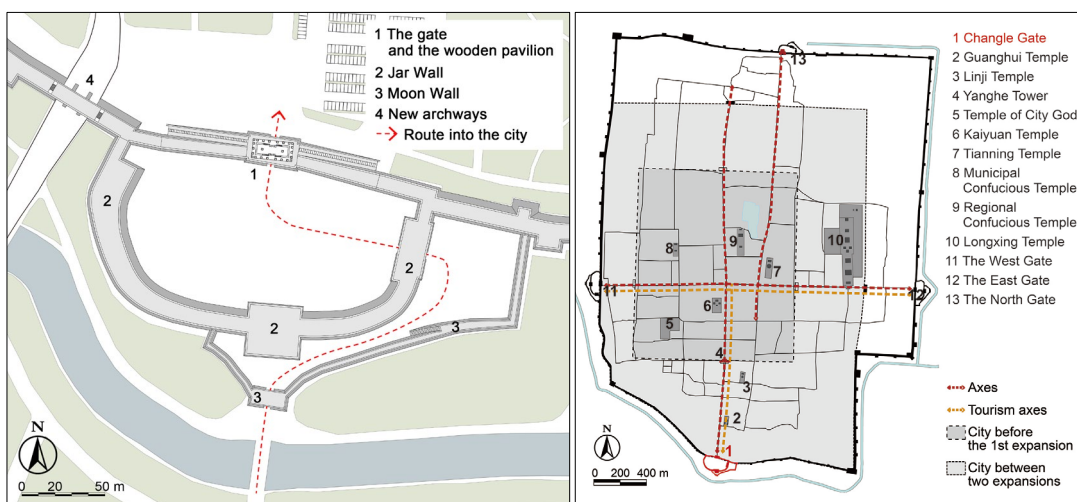


Fig. 1 Changle Gate, layout restored in 2013-2019. Source: author

Fig. 2 Expansions of the city of Zhengding. Source: author, based on Zhao, 2017

These interventions and ‘filtering’ should be based on sufficient knowledge of the pre-existing urban structure and texture and fully involve public life. This way, they will be able to enhance the correlated entirety into a regenerative structure that eventually integrates built heritages into the contemporary living city (Pezzetti, 2017).

Unfortunately, not all interventions were carried out in this way. Built heritage and historic cities are no longer merely cultural or historical objects in the increasingly affluent and leisure-oriented contemporary Chinese society. Still, they are also regarded as resources for city development strategies, especially tourism. The authority of ‘filtering’ that decides what to preserve has thus been taken over by the powerful tourism industry and the political force that collaborates with it (Čamprag, 2017), who also have replaced public life to dominate the production of Public spaces around built heritage (Chen, 2018). Built heritage sites and the past and memory they are carrying are used as symbols to create ‘themed’ public space, i.e., create an ambience of a fantasy that could stimulate activities and consumption (van Melik et al., 2007). Instead of being the link between built heritage and the living city, such themed public spaces tend to create an estranged and self-contained unit (Liu and Pezzetti, 2022) with the built heritage at its centre, refusing to interact with the rest of the city.

This paper focused on the built heritage of *Changle Gate* in *Zhengding* and its surrounding area, which have recently undergone tourism-oriented re-development. The role of the newly produced public spaces between *Changle Gate* and the city of *Zhengding* and their potential impact on the city is analysed.

## 2. *Changle Gate* and the tourism axes

*Changle Gate*, consisting of a gate with a wooden pavilion, a *Jar Wall*, and a *Moon Wall*<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1), is the south gate of *Zhengding*, a small historic city in North China. The city was first built as a military town in the 4th century B.C. and expanded two times in 762 A.D. and 1449 A.D. (Zhao, 2017) (Fig. 2). The present *Changle Gate* and city walls were constructed during the second expansion with rammed-earth covered by grey bricks (Xu, 2018).

*Changle Gate* was at the southern end of the north-south Avenue, which has always been one of the major structural axes



**Fig. 3** *Changle Gate* restored in 2001, the walls were left with bare rammed-earth; aerial photo. Source: Xu, 2018

**Fig. 4** *Changle Gate* restored in 2013-2019; aerial photo. Source: Zhengding Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/FsOb\\_fF-Pec0nl6rKBnMRg](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/FsOb_fF-Pec0nl6rKBnMRg)

of the city (Fig. 2) and was called the *Dragon Vein* (龙脉) according to *Fengshui* principles. The expansions elongated and doubled this axis and re-affirmed its persisting role in the overall urban structure (Liu and Pezzetti, 2022). The small village called *Nanguan*, formed outside *Changle Gate* for trade and transport purposes, further extended this axis out of the city.

<sup>1</sup> *Jar Wall* refers to the walls surrounding the gate, resembling a jar; *Moon Wall* surrounds half of the *Jar Wall*, resembling a crescent. They make a winding route into the city for defense purpose.

In 1937, the Japanese invasion damaged *Changle Gate* and destroyed the wooden pavilion. For the following decades, they were left unattended until 2001, when the local government restored *Changle Gate* and a few sections of the walls (Fig. 3). In 2013, the city walls were listed as a *Major Historical and Cultural Site Protected at the National Level*, marking the commencement of several re-development projects, which were finished by 2019. The walls were re-covered with bricks. The *Jar Wall* and *Moon Wall* were reconstructed to their original layout. Three new archways were opened west of *Changle Gate* for vehicle movement.

The city formulated a strategy to develop so-called 'suburban tourism' by attracting tourists from the large city of *Shijiazhuang*, 15 km south of *Zhengding* (Lan, 2004). South Avenue became the focus as one of the 'tourism axes' in this strategy since there were on its sides several key heritage sites (Fig. 2). The *Changle Gate* area that directly connects to *Shijiazhuang* by major roads was emphasised as the southern end of this axis.

Multiple tourism-oriented projects were carried out (Fig. 4, 5). The residential buildings north of *Changle Gate* were demolished for a green square and a parking lot (A, B in Fig. 5). The lands between *Linji Temple* and *Guanghui Temple* were cleared to construct a park and another parking lot (C, D). The agricultural fields east of *Changle Gate* were acquired for *Yunju Park* (E) and a riverside park (F).

*Nanguan* village was demolished and replaced by a group of commercial buildings with antique-style façades. The agricultural fields on both sides were transformed into parking lots (G) and an open-air event venue (H).

### **3. Role of the new public spaces**

This section talks about the role and impact of the new public spaces around *Changle Gate* from the perspective of different stakeholders.

#### **A sub-city for tourists**

The tourism industry was the primary force behind the re-development of the *Changle Gate* area. Out of a functional concern for mass tourism, vehicular traffic was prioritised. Sufficient, if not excessive, traffic facilities were constructed. Outside the city walls, *Hebei Avenue* was widened to take over the traffic from the *Zilong Bridge* that directly connects to *Shijiazhuang*. Inside the walls, *Guanghui Road* was widened and extended, and the South Avenue was offset to adapt to the new archways. Besides, several large parking lots were constructed as part of the traffic system.



Fig. 5 Changle Gate, Nangan, and part of the South Avenue; (left) in 2008, (right) in 2019. Source: author

On the leftover lands between the roads, public spaces were produced. The new *Nangan*, between the major traffic node and built heritage, was created as a themed public space to provide a fantasy ambience (van Melik et al., 2007). Here the complexity of the pre-existing village was eliminated and replaced with total predictability: predictable activities almost identical to other commercial streets, in front of a predictable background of antique-style façades. It offered a place for tourists to escape from the harsh and complex reality and find a sense of emotional security.



**Fig. 6** *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, segment of the city gate; (top) version in the 11th century, (bottom) version in the 18th century.

The rest of the new public spaces were designed as support facilities that offer little opportunity for diversified activities. The emptiness of square A and parking lot B bores visitors passing through *Changle Gate* and stops them from proceeding along the tourism axis into the city. Thus, the new public spaces around *Changle Gate* formed an isolated and self-contained tourist attraction site, suitable for tourism consumption but of little help in promoting tourism in the overall city.

### **An estranged unit**

*Changle Gate* was one of the most critical nodes along the north-south axis. Before the re-development in 2013-2019, the *Changle Gate* area presented a hierarchical texture: the Avenue - buildings along the Avenue - ordinary courtyard residences - farmlands. This texture affirmed the axis and recorded the process of the axis as an urban generator orienting the urban development (Fig. 5).

However, the new public spaces failed to re-affirm the axis (Fig. 5). The demolition of the courtyard residences erased the physical testimony of the city's development. The offset of the Avenue to the new archways further deprived of its axial role in the traffic system. In contrast, the east-west structure was emphasised. The three large public spaces (A, B, and E) along the significantly widened *Guanghui Road* were arranged without any formal rationale, fully exposing the massive city walls stretching east-west. Once entering the area from the north, one would immediately notice the strong east-west spatial orientation. This arrangement interrupted the north-south axis, separating the built heritage of *Changle Gate* and the new *Nanguan* from the overall urban structure.

Furthermore, there were always bustling commercial streets on the inner side of city gates in traditional Chinese cities, as depicted in *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, a series of ancient Chinese paintings recording rural-urban landscapes (Fig. 6). Instead, the newly developed *Changle Gate* area reversed this traditional layout with commercial streets outside and open spaces inside. *Changle Gate* and *Nanguan* thus formed an estranged and self-contained unit, which is disastrous for the perception of the historic urban landscape.

As for the public space between *Guanghui Temple* and *Linji Temple*, it is reasonable to infer that the decision-makers expected to create visual connections by removing the pre-existing buildings so that tourists could see the three heritage sites at one glance and get interested in visiting all. However, these built heritages were born to be embedded in the city's fabric. Emptiness without form nor meaning can only create separation rather than connections between them. Besides, appropriate signages are enough to arouse visitors' interest. 'Seeing all at one glance' would only lead to boredom.

### **Exclusion of local community**

Local inhabitants were excluded due to the acquisition and demolition of their residences; The features of the new public spaces further kept them away.

Pedestrian movement is essential to successful public spaces (Carmona et al., 2003). However, the design of the *Changle Gate* area lacked pedestrian connections from the neighbouring local community on the north. When a local resident tries to reach *Changle Gate* and *Nanguan* on foot, the six-lane *Guanghui Road* stops him; and the empty green square A and

parking lot B, offering no worthwhile and accessible activities, intimidate him from moving forward. Consequently, locals in their everyday life rarely use the new public spaces except for park C which is closely connected to the local community.

It's necessary to clarify that the locals are not completely rejecting the new *Nanguan*. They indeed visit it, but only when they are also tourists engaged in some temporary social or consumer activity. In their everyday public life that could represent the local lifestyle and local identity, the new *Nanguan* plays little role.

Furthermore, a series of 'denial cues' that convey to locals the message of inaccessibility (Lofland, 1998) is also responsible for the absence of the locals' everyday life. To name a few, parking lot B serving mostly tourists, seems to be telling the locals: 'this space is not for you unless you are also a tourist'. The expensive consumption due to high rent in *Nanguan* is filtering the users. Responding to the strategy of 'suburban tourism', public spaces here were designed to attract from the big cities more affluent tourists capable of bringing profit, rather than ordinary local residents.

#### 4. Reflections

With the analysis in the previous section, one could conclude that the primary purpose of the *Changle Gate* area's redevelopment was to commercialise this historic area as a predictable place for tourism consumption. It followed a standardised configuration: a symbolic built heritage, a commercial street, a green space, and a group of service facilities. The whole design only ensured each component of this configuration was present. Little attention was paid to the interaction between the components or their relationship with the urban context on morphology or urban life dimensions. In the compromise between the two extremes facing this historic area, the aspects that cannot be easily marketed are filtered out, leaving only those that could contribute to the short-term benefits of tourism (Čamprag, 2017).

The public spaces in this area were thus produced to serve this standardised configuration. Regardless of the spatial and cultural context, they formed an estranged unit around *Changle Gate* with a landscape that did not exist in anyone's memory, imagination, or any artwork depiction. It's an entirely new invention. Rather than integrating the built heritage into the living city and helping visitors to unveil the history residing in it, these public spaces cast a new veil around the already fragmented historic fabric and built heritage.

In present-day China's 'consumer society', objects are no longer consumed only for their usefulness but for their differences and symbolic value. Having filtered out the locality and historical significance of *Changle Gate*, the tourism industry exploited its symbolic meaning to attract tourists and stimulate consumption (Zhang and Deng, 2009). It indeed brought some economic benefit in the short term. But as the layered morphology and stratified historical imprints that carried unique urban identity were eliminated, the *Changle Gate* area lost its real persisting differences. It can only inspire some predictable and homogenous activities. In case some other historic areas in other small historic cities are re-developed for tourism, their novel symbols would easily 'steal' tourists away from the faded symbol of *Changle Gate*.

Even worse, the new public spaces around *Changle Gate* caused social exclusion against the local community. The future performance of the area depends only on tourists, while locals no longer play much of a role (Ward, 2006). The projects only tried to create a purified and abstract image of a fantasised historic area with themed public spaces, leading to the removal of the seemingly 'unclean' courtyard residences and farmlands. Consequently, the *Changle Gate* area lost the most charming aspects of a small historic city: historic ambience and authentic settings of local life. The built heritage was thus subtracted from the living city, unable to generate any contemporary meaning or memory for the present local generation. This tourism development is destined to be unsustainable and will eventually undermine the very foundation on which tourism itself is based.

## 5. Toward a sustainable future

The role of public space is of great potential in mediating the two extremes facing historic cities. If embedded in the pre-existing urban fabric and fully involving the local life, public spaces can form a framework integrating contemporary life with memory and the living city with built heritage. They could help enhance the historic urban landscape and meanwhile provide a solid foundation for sustainable tourism, achieving a balance among different stakeholders.

But the new public spaces around *Changle Gate* have unfortunately failed to play such a role. Due to the lack of awareness of the historical morphology and exclusion of the local community, they subtracted the built heritage of *Changle Gate* from the living city.

Large public spaces produced for tourism development are becoming common in China in recent years, consuming a tremendous amount of financial and human resources. Efforts should be made to ensure they play their expected role. The reflections on the *Changle Gate* area reminded us of some critical issues in such efforts.

First, historic cities call for comprehensive plans and designs instead of a standardised mass tourism configuration consisting of separate components. Second, although it is neither possible nor rational to restore all the historical features of centuries ago, any changes in contemporary interventions must be based on an in-depth study of the pre-existing city and full involvement of public life and the heritage management authority. Third, buildings of the late 20th century, although not 'ancient' in appearance, also carry the memories of generations and record the urban development of an era. They are unique and should not be treated as 'trash' to be removed even if they are in undesirable conditions. Fourth, unlike Western culture, the Chinese tend to preserve cultural continuity through non-material elements rather than the materials of ruins or relics (Botz-Bornstein, 2012). Projects lacking full knowledge of the site, like the *Changle Gate* area, reduced these non-material factors to the easiest-to-operate façades or the symbolism of individual heritage sites. They failed to realise that the city's layered morphology and public space qualities should also be involved in the historic urban landscape.

There were alternatives to the demolition-construction approach for producing new public spaces in the *Changle Gate* area. For example, some of the pre-existing courtyard residences along the South Avenue were no longer inhabited. Opening their courtyards to the public could be an opportunity to create a unique micro-scale public space system (Dong et al., 2018). For the 'suburban tourism' strategy, the rural-urban landscape, in contrast to the concrete jungle in the big city, could also be a sustainable tourism attraction and an opportunity for public spaces (Pezzetti, 2019).

Providing tourists with opportunities to interact with local people and local life can stimulate a unique attachment of visitors to the place and thus support sustainable tourism (Shang et al., 2020). To this end, the most crucial issue for the *Changle Gate* area is to restore the previous urban space with mixed functions and activities to keep an optimal balance among residents, visitors, and tourists. The impact of vehicular traffic should be minimised, for example, by diverting the traffic with flexible arrangements of one-way streets. To eliminate the 'denial cues', the large public spaces should be divided into human scales, and adequate daily public facilities should be ensured, especially public benches and necessary shading facilities (Chen et al., 2016). The *Changle Gate* area should not be reduced to a sub-city or an estranged unit isolated from the living city. It should be fun for all, not just tourists (Ward, 2006).

## Acknowledgement

Chinese Scholarship Council financially supported this work.

## References

- Botz-Bornstein, Thorsten (2012): Hyperreal Monuments of the Mind: Traditional Chinese Architecture and Disneyland. In *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 23 (2), pp. 7–17. Available online at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41758892>.
- Čamprag, Nebojša (2017): Museumification of Historical Centres: The Case of Frankfurt Altstadt Reconstruction. In Nicola Bellini, Cecilia Pasquinelli (Eds.): *Tourism in the City*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 165–178. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-26877-4\_11.
- Carmona, Matthew; Heath, Tim; Oc, Taner; Tiesdell, Steve (2003): *Public Places - Urban Spaces. The Dimensions of Urban Design*. Oxford: Architectural Press.
- Carr, S.; Stephen, C.; Francis, M.; Rivlin, L. G.; Stone, A. M.; Altman, I.; Stokols, D. (1992): *Public Space: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge series in environment and behavior)*.
- Chen, Shuisheng (2018): The Three Logics of Urban Public Space Production in China and Their Balance. In *Academic Monthly* 50 (05), pp. 101–110. DOI: 10.19862/j.cnki.xsyk.2018.05.010.
- Chen, Yiyong; Liu, Tao; Liu, Weibin (2016): Increasing the use of large-scale public open spaces: A case study of the North Central Axis Square in Shenzhen, China. In *Habitat International* 53, pp. 66–77. DOI: 10.1016/j.habitatint.2015.10.027.
- Dong, Hexuan; Liu, Qian; Wang, Fang (2018): Miniature Public Space Planning: A Case Study of Hanyang District in Wuhan. In *City Planning Review* 42 (4), pp. 33–43.
- Lan, Guoliang (2004): A strategic study of regional sustainable development of a suburban model—A case study of Zhengding County of Hebei Province. In *Journal of Hebei Normal University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)* 27 (2), pp. 35–41. DOI: 10.13763/j.cnki.jhehnu.psse.2004.02.007.
- Liu, Qian; Pezzetti, Laura (2022): Tourism-boosting rebuilding of historic buildings and urban form : the case study of Yanghe Tower and its urban morphology in Zhengding, China. In : *Annual Conference Proceedings of the XXVIII International Seminar on Urban Form*. Glasgow: University of Strathclyde Publishing, pp. 634–641. DOI: 10.17868/strath.00080470.
- Lofland, Lyn H. (1998): *The public realm. Exploring the city's quintessential social territory*. Hawthorne N.Y.: Aldine de Gruyter (Communication and social order).
- Pezzetti, Laura (2017): The Old and the New: Designs to Enhance Cesano Maderno Old Town through a Regenerative Structure. In *Built Heritage* 1 (4), pp. 52–70. DOI: 10.1186/BF03545657.
- Pezzetti, Laura (2019): *Layered Morphologies and Latent Structures. Reading, Decoding and Rewriting to Enhance Historic Rurban Landscape*. Shanghai: Tongji University Press.
- Shang, Wenwen; Qiao, Guanghui; Chen, Nan (2020): Tourist experience of slow tourism: from authenticity to place attachment – a mixed-method study based on the case of slow city in China. In *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research* 25 (2), pp. 170–188. DOI: 10.1080/10941665.2019.1683047.
- van Melik, Rianne; van Aalst, Irina; van Weesep, Jan (2007): Fear and Fantasy in the Public Domain: The Development of Secured and Themed Urban Space. In *Journal of Urban Design* 12 (1), pp. 25–42. DOI: 10.1080/13574800601071170.
- Ward, Stephen V. (2006): 'Cities are Fun!': Inventing and Spreading the Baltimore Model of Cultural Urbanism. In Francisco Javier Monclús, Manuel Guàrdia i Bassols (Eds.): *Culture, Urbanism and Planning*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Aldershot, England, Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate (Heritage, Culture and Identity), pp. 271–285. DOI: doi.org/10.4324/9781315575520.
- Xu, Conghui (2018): Protection and Display of Zhengding City Wall and South Gate Barbican Platform. In *Wenwu Chunqiu* (3), pp. 46–51.
- Zhang, Jingxiang; Deng, Huayuan (2009): On the Forming of Consumer Space in Modern Urban Historical & Cultural Areas:



An Analysis from the Perspective of Spatial Production. In *International Urban Planning* 24 (1), pp. 43–47.

Zhao, Xianchao (2017): Image Reconstruction of the Zhengding Ancient City. In *Journal of National Museum of China* (6), pp. 6–22.