Appendix 4: Li Shiqiao

CHINESE CITIES AS MEGACITIES

BIOGRAPHY

Li Shiqiao is Associate Professor at the Department of Architecture, Chinese University of Hong Kong. He studied architecture at Tsinghua University and obtained his PhD from AA School of Architecture and Birkbeck College, University of London. He is author of *Power and Virtue, Architecture and Intellectual Change in England 1650-1730* (Routledge 2007), and his writings have appeared in prestigious journals in architecture and cultural theory. He co-founded BHSL Design and has won several international architectural design awards.

→ In this essay I describe Chinese cities through several basic ideas that may contribute to a tentative framing of recent developments: maximum quantities, safety and figuration. These notions are presented as dialectically poised to revise several others that gave rise to what might be called the western city: proportion, danger, and authenticity. Proportion is quantitative control internalised as moral values; proportionality – both constructed and subverted – not only underlines art, for instance, as proportioned sounds (music) and geometries (architecture), but also supplies a notion of virtue (decorum). Despite the 20th-century modernist revision of form-making through functionalism, proportions remain crucial to cities and architecture. In Asia, however, we now face a fundamental shift away from proportionality towards maximum quantities, contributing to a new phase of capital accumulation. Maximum quantity is sustainable only through a disciplined and uncompromising dedication to safety in cities, which has resulted in hardened rules of regulation and design.

In Chinese cities, the management of quantities is not conducted in proportional relationship to God, Nature and Man; instead, it is worked out through a re-invented culture of figuration. In this culture, naturalist conditions (and functionalism) are supplanted by more compelling synthetic conditions as a system of figures – paralleling the Chinese language that serves as perhaps the most fundamental and sophisticated example of that system – in which humanistic values and their influences in city-making have been formulated in unique ways. In this essay I reflect further on the discussions of these notions that have already appeared in a series of papers titled 'City of Maximum Quantities' (Li 2007a); 'The Cathartic City' (Li 2007b), and 'Mediated Architecture in China' (Li 2008).

Proportion and maximum quantities

One of the central issues of today's cities is that of quantities. The sizes and numbers of things we create and possess acquire great significances in various schemes of things. Areas of cities, sizes of their economies, numbers of residents, levels of their income, amounts of profit, and degrees of pollution are all critically related to how cities are positioned in relation to other cities, and how cities are managed in relation to the daily life of residents. For centuries, quantities in cities were mediated by intellectual frameworks in various cultural traditions; in the past 100 years, these frameworks have undergone two important reformulations in the west and in Asia. The first of these was related to the emergence of Modernism, a new design method and aesthetic sensibility that gave rise to the acceptance of much larger quantities in cities; this worked well with the demands of the quantity-based mechanical production resulting from the Industrial Revolution. The second reformulation is being tested today, in Asian cities such as Hong Kong and Shenzhen; it has aimed to reach maximum quantities (Figure 1). These reformulations have had a tremendous influence on our cities, and they point to a future of cities that requires urgent scholarly attention and critique.

Motivating the rise of maximum quantities is the notion of development. If 'God' is the keyword for the mediaeval city and 'propriety' for the 18th-century city, 'development' – sustainable and otherwise – is the keyword for our cities in the 20th- and 21st-centuries. Development is primarily related to the expansion of cities, as the word 'developer' indicates. Banks are 'development banks', countries are either developed (awaiting redevelopment), developing, or undeveloped. However, much of the development today is of one particular kind, which is connected to the circulation of capital in its perpetual search for sources of cheap materials, labour, and products. This is a development process that is largely dedicated to the production of abundance.

The production of abundance, historically, has always been mediated by an intellectual framework that perhaps is first elaborated in Plato's *Timaeus* (1997). Here, Plato speculates on the origin and structure of the universe, and suggests that there are numerical relationships between different elements which come together to form a complete whole. The key idea here is that of a 'bond' that 'combines' the four constituents of the universe – air, fire, water and earth – into a whole, and it is where the numerical relationship is found:

> **the best bond is one that effects the closest unity between itself and the terms it is combining; and this is best done by a continued geometrical proportion … So by these means and from these four constituents the body of the universe was created to be at unity owing to proportions; in consequence it acquired concord, so that having once come together in unity with itself it is indissoluble by any but its compounder. (Plato 1977:44)**

For instance, the idea of the mean can be found in the numerical sequence of 1, 4/3, 2; the mean 4/3 is one-third of 1 more than 1, and one-third of 2 less than 2. At the heart of this numerical relationship are two sets of small integers, 1, 2, 4, 8 and 1, 3, 9, 27, which form two parallel relationships that mirror one another (Figure 2). Systems that derive from these fundamental assumptions, for Plato, construct the whole of the universe.

The Italian Renaissance left us a vast intellectual legacy which is partly founded on these speculations of proportions. The discovery of the manuscript of *Timaeus* – unknown to mediaeval scholars – caused tremendous excitement at the time. Francesco Giorgi's *De Harmonia Mundi* (1525), for instance, integrated the Pythagorean-Platonic theory of numbers with musical notes as a 'harmonic order' of the universe (Wittkower 1988). Various systems of harmonic proportions can be found in artistic and architectural works (Figure 3); the influence of harmonic proportions in architecture perhaps reached an extraordinary stage in the teachings of Ecole de Beaux-Arts in Paris (Figure 4). This theory of proportions was of course not just a theory of art; it was a framework that conditioned 'relationship' in all its social, religious and political forms as the 'bond' between thoughts and actions. Baldassare Castigilione's *The Courtier* (1528) fashioned a perfect human being who was a union of harmonic proportions between, among numerous other human traits, prudence and courage, humility and pride, action and contemplation. Both in strictly numerical terms and in their abstraction, proportional relationships have taken on a significant role in

fig 1

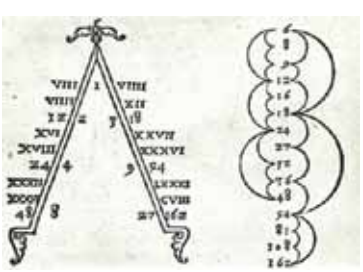


fig 2

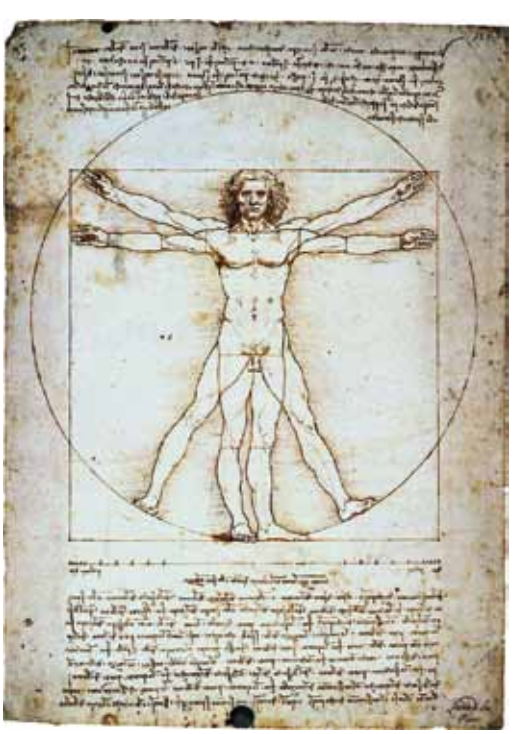


fig 3

fig 1 Ma On Shan, Hong Kong
Population density 151 000 per square mile Population 200 000
Author's photograph

fig 2 Illustration from Francesco Giorgi, *De Harmonia Mundi*, 1525

fig 3 Leonardo da Vinci, *Vitruvian Man*, 1513
Pen and ink with wash over metalpoint on paper
25 x 19.2 cm
Gallerie del'Accademia
Venice, Italy

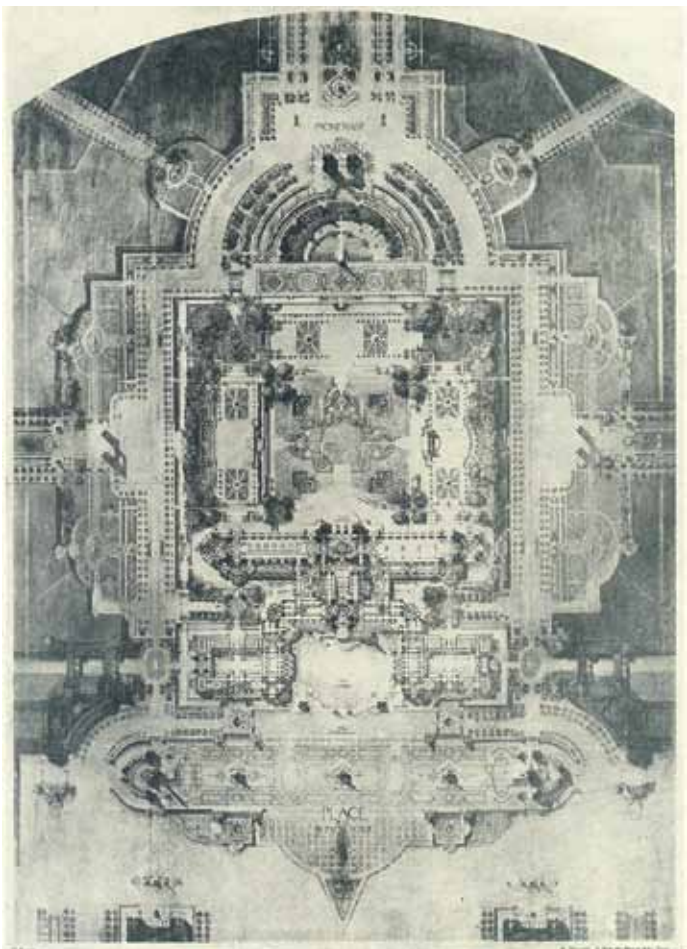


fig 4

fig 6

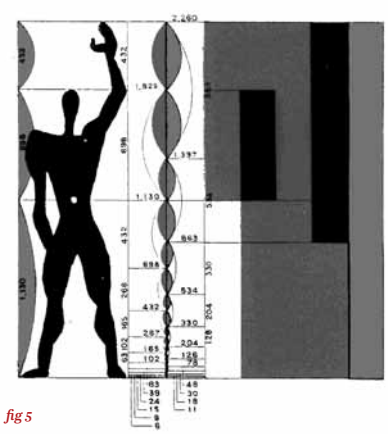


fig 5

fig 4 Second Prize, Prix de Rome, Ecole de Beaux-Arts, 1912-13 Illustration from Harbeson, J. 1926. *The Study of Architectural Design.* New York: The Pencil Point Press.

fig 5 Le Corbusier, *The Modulor: A Harmonious Measure to the Human Scale Universally Applicable to Architecture and Mechanics,* 1948

fig 6 Sai Yeung Choi Street, Mongkok, Hong Kong
Author's photograph

fig 7 *Polishing the Floor at New Town Plaze* Shatin, Hong Kong
Author's photograph

fig 7

social life (manners in proportion) as well as in city-making (buildings in proportion).

Modernism in the 20th-century re-conceived proportional relationships; it turned away from the formulaic proportional systems of the Beaux-Arts tradition and discovered new possibilities in the industrial process. Although this new aesthetic sensibility – perhaps demonstrated most effectively by Manhattan – radically expanded quantities in cities, it is nevertheless anchored in alternative proportional systems, such as Le Corbusier's modular man (Figure 5). But more often than not, this continued dedication to proportional relationships – perhaps internalised as 'good taste' and institutionalised in university teaching programmes and urban planning regulations – remained as underlying cultural practices in western cities in the age of modern architecture. Humanistic values as they were constructed over two millennia continue to exert a significant influence whenever they became threatened by crude capitalist expansions.

In an Asian city like Hong Kong, moral values have been constructed very differently from the contrived systems of harmonic proportions in western cities. Hong Kong's unique history as a colonial and trading city has created conditions for it to become a city of maximum quantities. In Hong Kong, heights, density, and proximity continue to be pushed to the limit; this creates convenience, speed, abundance, and opportunities (Figure 6). Here, what controls quantities are not systems of harmonic proportions, but the rules of hygiene and safety. In this sense, Hong Kong offers a glimpse of the future; it is an intriguing mixture of excitement, plurality, opportunities, and an incessant disinfection. This extraordinarily vibrant and exciting metropolis also contains a disturbing vision: as more people wear surgical masks in public, more young pupils have their body temperatures taken each morning, more cleaning ladies in shopping malls wear nurse-like uniforms, more architecture uses homogeneous and anti-bacterial materials, and more 'interiorised public spaces' like shopping malls choose to have an artificially filtered and conditioned air supply – the city increasingly resembles a gigantic hospital, a citadel of hygiene, and a war against pollution and danger (Figure 7).

Danger and safety

The western city is a result of complex understanding of danger; it is both to be avoided and necessary. This is quite visible in the Greek construction of the body in which dangers shape corporeal perfection. Richard Sennett's (1996) discussions on nakedness in Greek cities and the necessity of pain in Christian cities point to the understanding of the corporeal vulnerability as a defining force (Sennett 1996); the exposure to danger gives rise to a crucial definition of humanity (Figure 8). The culmination of such exposure to danger was in the act of war, the ultimate condition of 'the body in danger'. For Plato (1977:31), a society is successful only when it can wage war successfully:

> Let me now go on to tell you how I feel about the society we have described. My feelings are rather like those of a man who has seen some splendid animals, either in a picture or really alive but motionless, and wants to see them moving and engaging in some of the activities for which they appear to be formed. That's exactly what I feel about the society we have described. I would be glad to hear some account of it engaging in transactions with other states, waging war successfully and showing in the process all the qualities one would expect from its systems of education and training, both in action and in negotiation with its rivals.

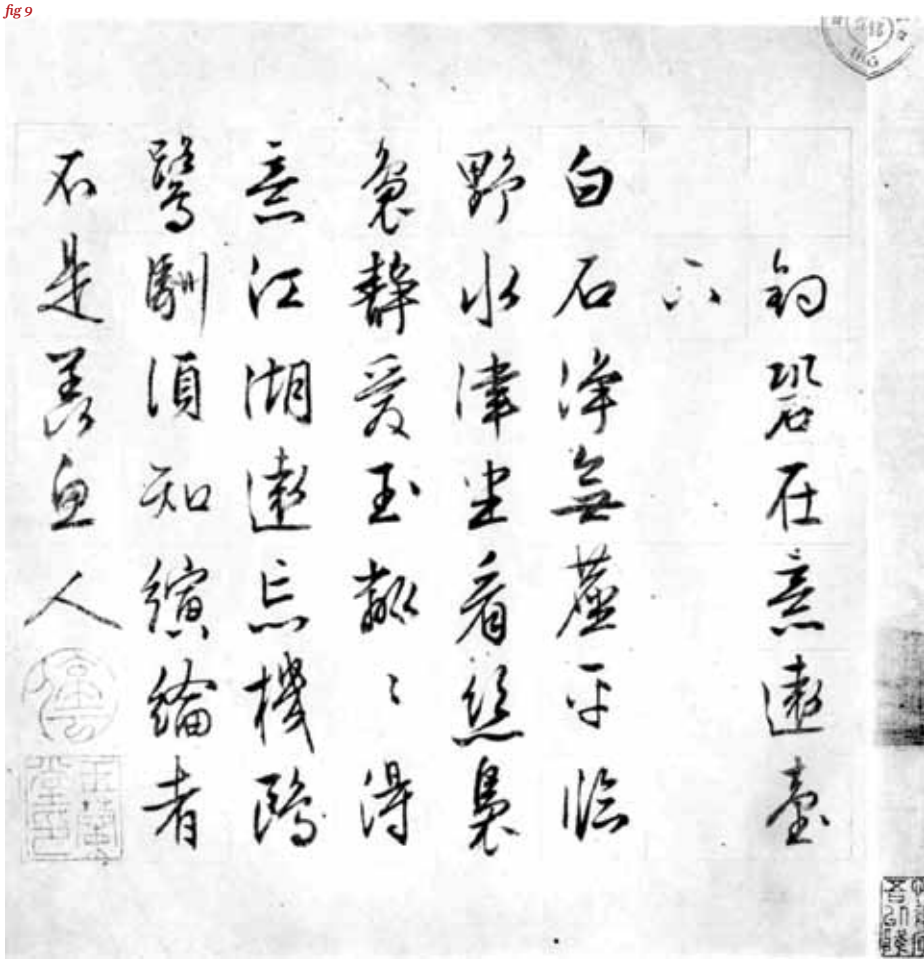
If the imagination of the western city continues to be influenced by the interpretation and management of dangers (Beck 1992), such as risks of nuclear war, environmental disaster, moral decay, or technological meltdown, the Chinese city has been conceived through total safety. If the western society is risk society, the Chinese society is safe society.

In its cultivation of moral life and accumulation of knowledge, the Chinese culture has much in common with other civilisations in the world. However, its understanding of danger is quite distinct when compared with the Greek notion of 'the combatant body'. Traditional Chinese intellectuals had in the past carefully avoided the aestheticisation of danger; rivalries, battles, ruins, dying bodies – prominent themes in western art – never appeared in traditional Chinese art. There was a different sense of harmony in Chinese literature and paintings, one that was often framed under the conditions of total safety in seclusion: under a tree, next to a stream, on a fishing boat, and in a pavilion surrounded by nature (Figure 9). The fragile scholar became the ultimate symbol for the civilised body which was held as an ideal against the violent naturalist body (Song 2004). In the popular imagination, longevity, wealth, and happiness, instead of risky struggles to 'realise the self' (as Hollywood blockbusters seem to perpetuate), dominate daily practices. This deliberate

fig 8

fig 10

fig 9



cultivation of safety creates an absence of a discourse of violence, which seems to have resulted in a different mode of conflict in China; violent conflicts were no longer bound by the kind of 'code of conduct at the time of war' that the Greek combatant culture formulated. Safety society has an important impact both on peace and on violence.

Mao Zedong's revolution in China in the 20th-century was a determined endeavour to shift the focus of the safety culture to one that also embraces risks, and not just pushing the management of risks into a moral and aesthetic black hole. One of the most important sites of the revolution has been the body: the traditional body in safety was reinvented to experience the body in danger (Figure 10). Mao himself had developed a strict regiment of physical exercises, and had made this aspect of his life an important element in the propaganda of revolution. The achievement in China in the field of competitive sports – which was entirely absent from traditional intellectual life – has been extraordinary and highly visible; aesthetic sensibility found in strenuous physical exertions in a competitive spirit has become a new aspect of the Chinese culture developed in the past 100 years. However, as in all cultural transformations, the Chinese culture has not become Greek by hosting the Olympic Games; it merely reinvents itself in parallel to the Greek conception of the combatant body. In the transformation, the Chinese safety society continues to play an important role in the process of building cities.

As a frontier Chinese city instead of a colonial city, Hong Kong is uniquely interesting in its perception and management of real and imagined dangers in the city. Disciplined applications of rules of hygiene and safety are fundamental to sustain maximum quantities; this influences the city in important ways. Instead of cultivating an awareness of water edges, the city is determined to install protective railings in a determined way. It is due to the dedication of Hong Kong's safety experts that in a port city surrounded by the sea, there is almost no public access to water; in the legal and medical imaginations of the city of Hong Kong, water is more dangerous than fun (Figure 11). The incessant disinfection through washing, polishing, and sterilising also has an aesthetic impact on the city as more and more elements in the city are wrapped around in homogenous materials such as washable tiles, plastic flooring, furniture, and table covers (Figure 12). Porous materials, which provide a sense of engagement with the environment through porosity and ageing, have become dangerous materials in the city. The city becomes one of tiles and cladding, weather-resistant and antiseptic; safety signs and audio announcements in public transportation systems remind the residents of danger and safety.

fig 8 The Body in Danger.
Hagesandros, Athenodors and Polydorus, *Laocoön and His Sons*, c 175-150 BC
White marble
Height 242 cm
Museo Pio Clementino
Vatican Museums

Gombrich, EH. 1995. *The Story of Art*. London: Phaidon: 110.

fig 9 Wen Zhengming (1470-1559), *Scenes from Zhuo Zheng Yuan*, 1533

fig 10 The Body in Revolution.
Poster from the Cultural Revolution

fig 11

fig 12

fig 13

fig 11 Closed-off waterfront, Science Park, Hong Kong
Author's photograph

fig 12 Polished surfaces at New World Centre, Hong Kong
Author's photograph

fig 13 Waterfront, Hong Kong
Author's photograph

Authenticity and figuration

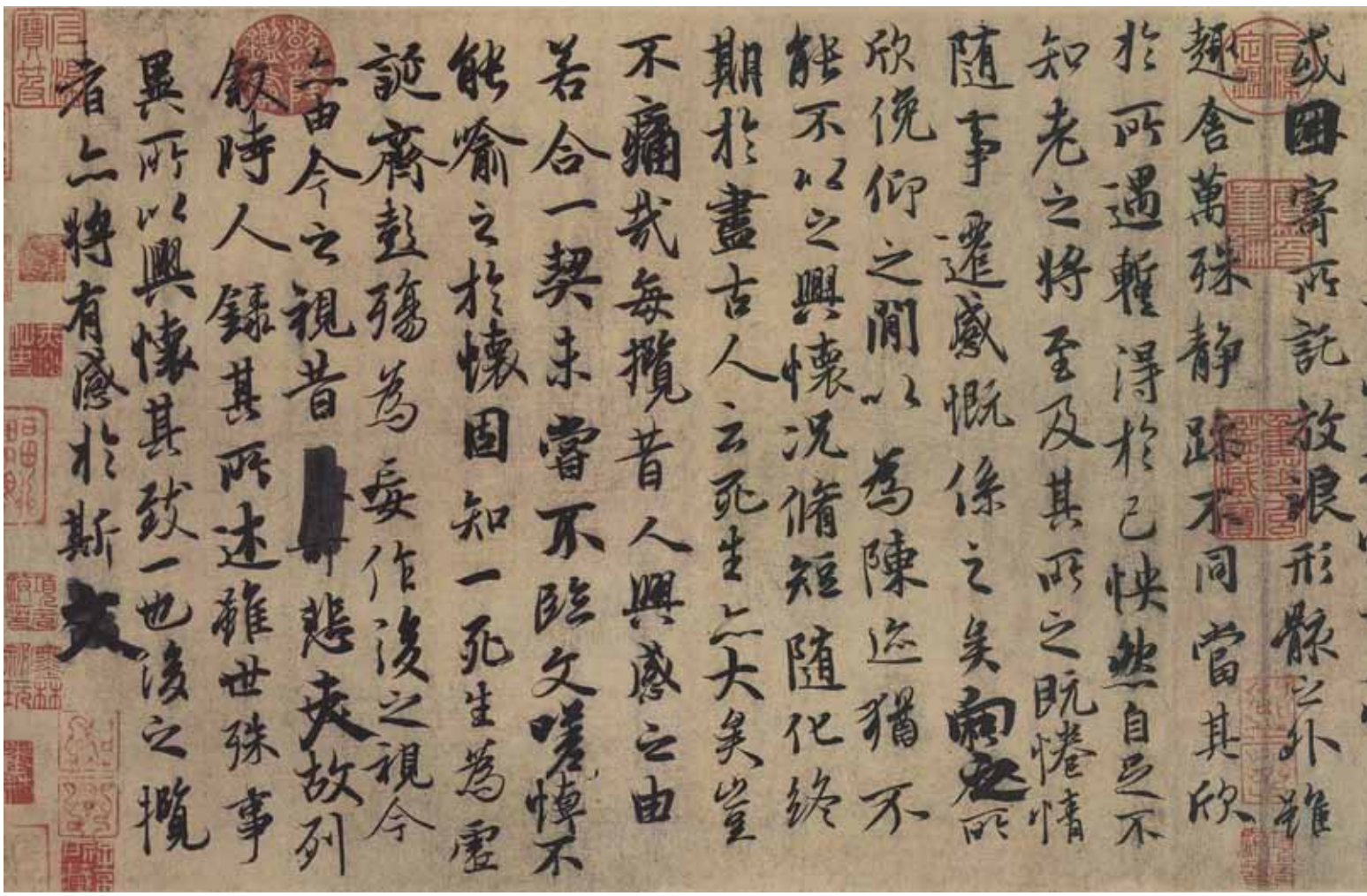
If poetic meanings are not found in harmonic proportions and the body in danger, where are they located in the Chinese city? Underlying both harmonic proportions and the body in danger is the tremendous force to return to the origins of things, from various current conditions which represent different states of corruption and deviation. Mathematical truths are inalienable, and unassisted corporeal prowess is fundamental to life. We may call this truer form of reality 'authentic states'. In the western intellectual tradition, the construction of these authentic states and the endeavours to return to them - in search of truth, divinity, being – have become the all-consuming intellectual passion. Deviations from authenticity are deeply troubling, as Plato already indicated in his *The Republic*, in which he suggested that the image-makers – poets, playwrights, musicians, painters – produce a false and deviated truth in images, and should be excluded or controlled in his ideal republic for ideal citizens. Early Christian thoughts inherited this idea of truth and image, and formulated the divine with a strong sense of authentic religious truths.

The consumer society in the 20th- and 21st- centuries presents a particularly disturbing character in its reliance on simulation as an essential mode of operation. This mode of operation has a major impact on architecture and the city. Instead of conceiving 'authentic states' of building materials and their 'nature expressions', contemporary cities feature buildings of surface effects – achieved through stucco, curtain walls, cladding, neon lights, advertising boards, and electronic screens (Figure 13). Jean Baudrillard (1994) describes this reality not just as a copy of an original, but as a simulacrum: a copy that does not have an original, a truth that hides the fact that there is none.

Image and reality have a unique relationship in Chinese culture. This is predicated on the way in which the Chinese square words strategise meanings in relation to reality. In some ways, the Chinese text is image; it is visually organised as a gridiron display of a series of images that do not seem to conceive a state of authenticity. The images of the Chinese text are not pictorial copies of original forms; they are, like simulacra, their own originals at the moment of inception (Figure 14). Originality and authenticity become marginal qualities in a system of images that cultivates primary qualities and poetic meanings elsewhere. This fundamental strategy in the production of poetic meanings gave rise to many forms of artistic works that need to be understood in different ways.

Perhaps we can describe this Chinese strategy of image as text the culture of figuration. By emphasising the significance of the figure – the Chinese square word is the quintessential form of the figure – at the centre of communication, the Chinese culture has developed a unique bond between things and thoughts. While the alphabet creates an inherent degree of abstraction which is carefully cultivated in the notion of bias-free and disinterested scientific knowledge, the culture of figuration operates with a thickness of meanings both abstract and figural simultaneously. The credibility of knowledge lies both in the abstract logic and in the figure of that logic. The impact of this culture of figuration on the city is profound; the demands of figuration colour all elements in Chinese cities in terms of their distribution, placement, and articulation. All these elements are still quite legible even when the Chinese city, as is often the case, is measured against intellectual frameworks developed from the history of western cities.

To understand the unique culture of figuration in Chinese cities, we must begin to frame the Chinese city in several ways. The first is the notion of singularity and distinctness. If a city is framed by the idea of proportional bonds, the quality of a design is measured, in part, by the way it relates to context in sizes and functions. The demand for singularity and distinctness of the figure in the Chinese cultural context has meant that the contextual relationship is no longer measured in terms of proportional relationships, but by a



relationship embedded in the figurative potential of designs. There is, so to speak, a system of figures in which each singular and distinct component plays a role without changes in form, much like the shape of a square word in a gridiron display in calligraphy. This is rather different from a relationship grounded in the change of forms - singular/plural, feminine/masculine, past/future and so on – as a way of constructing contextual relationships. The figurative tradition leads to the second feature in Chinese architecture: function follows form. Both traditional and contemporary Chinese architecture has a strong interest in form-making, which is fundamentally important to the figurative scheme. The third feature is seen in the interest of the system of figures to be complete and balanced, not lacking in essential elements: the ying as well as the yang, the strong as well as the delicate, the dense as well as the sparse. This feature in Chinese design is often misconceived as a form of eclecticism. This system of figures is protected by anxieties of figurelessness and disfigurement. In this context, 'emptiness' is very difficult to conceive unless it is balanced by an accompanying 'fullness'. In architecture, ruins are more likely to be understood as disfigurement rather than as something that evokes a romanticised past; there is, in Chinese cities, a powerful desire to 'restore' rather than to 'conserve' with

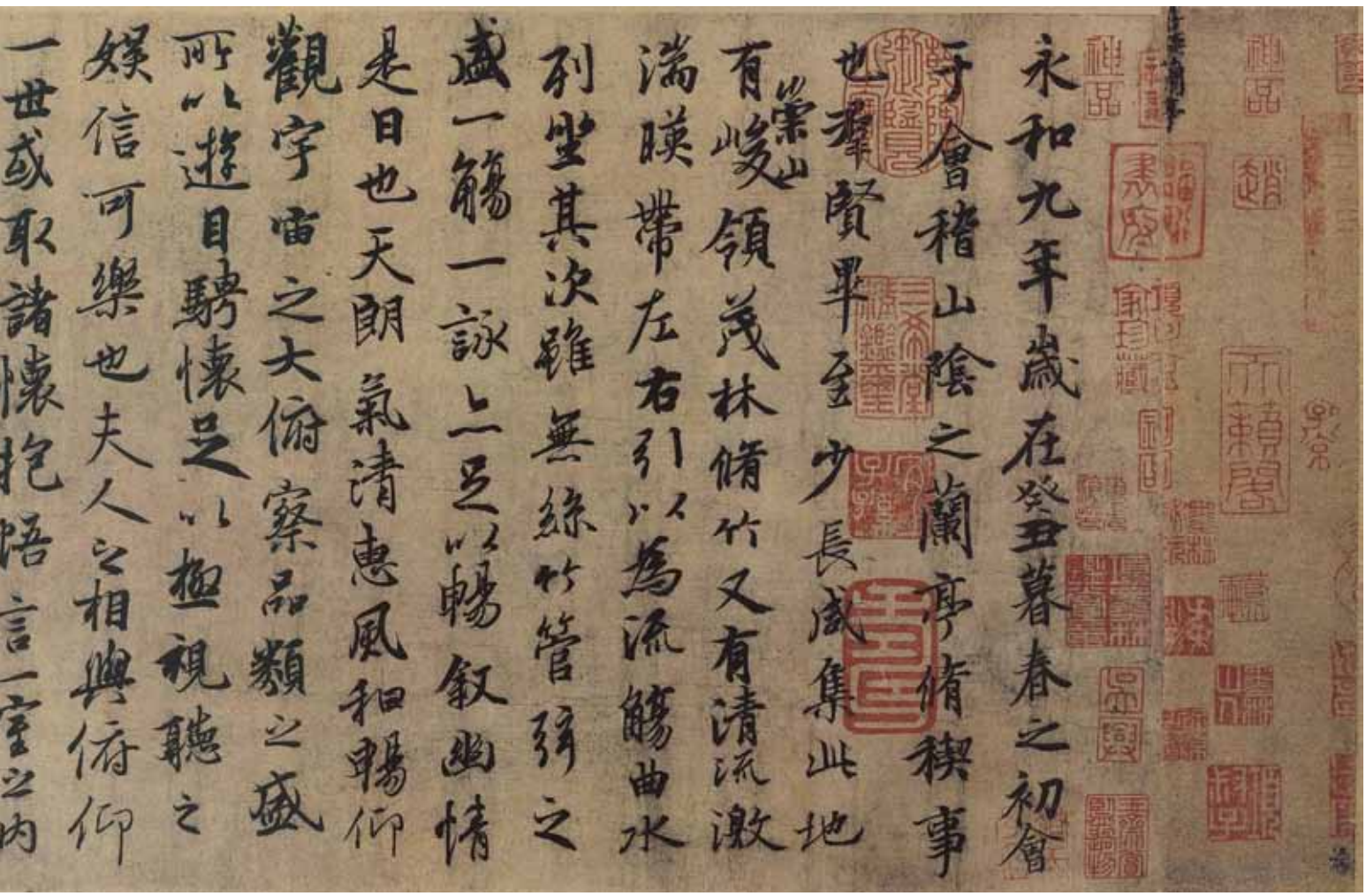


fig 14 Lanting Xu, believed to be calligraphed by Wang Xizhi, 321-379

regard to heritage-building in the past. This restoration is not a return to authenticity; it is its loss. The loss of authenticity in the acts of restoration, in this cultural context, is compensated for by the renewed prowess of the figure in the formulation of poetic possibilities in the system of figures.

The powerful influence of this culture of figuration can perhaps be seen in the works of the Italian Jesuit, Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), who worked as a painter at Qing Court in the hope of convincing the Chinese emperors to accept Christian missions in China. (Beurdeley 1971) Trained in the Baroque tradition in Italy, Castiglione made use of his skills to reinvent the Chinese painting in the imperial court without deviating from the figurative schemes (Figure 15). This Italian reinvention of Chinese figuration, with all its skills to recreate realistic details of objects, was highly appreciated by the Qing court, which was disposed towards decorative designs. The system of figures creates a more compelling form of reality in which naturalist conditions and functionalism are supplanted by more compelling synthetic conditions. They secure poetic possibilities in the world of figures, and not in the notion of returning to the more truthful and more beautiful authentic states.

As Chinese cities continue to expand and take shape in the 21st-century, the notions of maximum quantities, safety and figuration – distinctly different from western conceptions of cities – work together to create very different cities in China. While coping with common urban demands in population growth, density, housing and industries, public infrastructural provisions, transportation systems, pollution, sustainable development, and so on, the fundamental ideas in the conception of cities reformulate humanistic values in Chinese cities and give them unique forms. Our understanding of Chinese cities should move away from the framework of seeing them as alternatives to and deviations from the western city, towards a perception that is based on their own frames of references. This would provide us with more an effective and critical engagement with the issue of Chinese cities in which problems of nature, public space, equality, liberty and density are particularly persistent and challenging (Figure 16).

fig 15

fig 16

fig 15 Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766) Mulan I, *Emperor Qianlong Entering a Town on Horseback*, mid-8th-century Painting on silk (detail) Beurdeley, C & M. 1971 *Giuseppe Castiglione, A Jesuit Painter at the Court of the Chinese Emperors.* London: Lund Humpheries.

fig 16 Kowloon Station, Hong Kong Author's photograph

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