

The Renaissance in Fourteenth to Seventeenth-Century Europe: A Spiritual Inspiration for Urban Cultural Reconstruction in Contemporary China

The Renaissance upon the Middle Ages brought about a new value system, a new form of social organization, and a new way of life in Europe. Beginning with a basic revival of arts in cities, the Renaissance not only transformed political, economic, social, and cultural landscapes, but also prepared soils and planted seeds for liberty, democracy, capitalism, and various other institutions of modernity across the civil society. China is now in a period of rapid economic development and widespread social change. The reconstruction of cities appears to be one of the most significant features. While the hardware of the Chinese city takes an impressive shape in a short span of time, the software or the "soft power" of culture across the Chinese urban sphere remains a daunting task for years to come. There is a critical lack of cultural elites, elitisms, masters, and masterpieces on the one hand, and a phenomenal lack of social appreciators, appreciations, consumers, and consumptions on the other. This paper connects cultural reconstruction of contemporary Chinese cities to the Renaissance in fourteenth to seventeenth-century Europe to see how the former can draw from the latter as a source of inspiration as well as what a new line of interpretation the latter may gain from the former.

Keywords: China, culture reconstruction, Renaissance, urban modernization.

Introduction

The Renaissance upon the Middle Ages brought about a new value system, a new form of social organization, and a new way of life in Europe. The Chinese reflection on the Renaissance has not been restricted to culture and art. It has propagated as a comprehensive social revolution, meaning a unity of inheritance with innovation, protection with creation. The urban, as a symbolic existence, has created many pivotal elements of this revolution. In the context of social development, the urban is not only a form of existence as a physical space, but also a cultural container, a space of incubation for social development. Indeed, urban construction contributes to the change of lifestyle, the improvement in the quality of life, and the rise of a new civil existence,

cultural consciousness, and value recognition. Urban construction and urban culture now become the body and soul of contemporary Chinese society. Through investment-driven construction, China's urban hardware has marched to the internationally advanced level in several aspects. However, urban culture as endogenous power still lags much behind. A brand-new city needs new civic quality, commonsense value, and cultural creativity to hold and promote its existence. Reflecting on the medieval urban Renaissance, can we draw any inspiration about how to construct our urban cultural core?

Modern China's Dialectical Absorption of the European Medieval Renaissance Cultural Thought

Renaissance first appeared in the modern newspaper *East-West Monthly Magazine* in August 1, 1833. One of its articles mentioned: "Before printing emerged, Xiongnu and Turkey invaded Europe, and after that, paper and books were ruined. Thousands of years later, the Renaissance began to pick it up ..." Subsequently, there have been some new words such as 'literature renaissance,' 'literature retro,' 'ancient culture renaissance,' 'art and literature revitalization' to refer to European Renaissance.

Kang Youwei, a famous revolutionary and educator in late Qing Dynasty, referred the Renaissance as a 'literary revival' and introduced it from the perspective of cultural movement. He said: "After the Italian Literary Renaissance, new things came up as old things faded away. Francis Bacon and Descartes established new theories and promoted physical objects. Since then new arts and new things have emerged in large numbers." Hu Shi, a leader of the new cultural movement, used to be the president of Beijing University. He preferred 'regeneration era' to other translations of the Renaissance. Later, he often thought about China's academic trends and cultural movements, using the European Renaissance as a reference. Chen Duxiu, a great patriotic thinker, looked up to the Renaissance as a source of inspiration for all revolutions and mentioned in his article: "Since the Renaissance, revolution happened in politics, religion, ethics, and morals. What's more, it promoted the rise and development in literature and art."

Yet it was not until the May Fourth Movement that a rational understanding of the Renaissance culture had become a reality. This movement broke out on May 4, 1919 in Beijing. Involving young students, businesspeople, and the mass, the patriotic movement took place in various forms, such as demonstrations, petitions, strikes, and violence against the government, imperialism, and feudalism. This movement sought ideological and cultural breakthroughs to the remaking of the nation and has become an important part

of modern national renewal (Yu Zuhua, 2015). It promoted the spirit of nationality, democracy, and national renaissance. As well, it focused national renaissance on cultural renaissance and impelled a transformation from traditional ideas to modern ones.

Indeed, there has never been any lack of observation and reflection on the Renaissance as a revolution. China has seen it as a discovery of the truth of 'man' and a recognition of the significance of man in social transformation. At that time, China also carried out an impassionate national revival. The 'revival' means a combination of restoration with reconstruction, inheritance with innovation, and classical culture resurrection with new culture creation.

Interpretation of the Core of the European Urban Cultural Renaissance

In fact, the most profound significance of the Renaissance lies in not only the revival of urban art itself, but also the impact of urban Renaissance in political, economic, social, and cultural arenas, on the daily life of civil society in various fields, resulting in social transformation by way of capitalism, democracy, and modernity. The most central understanding reached by this study is that the essence of the medieval Renaissance in Europe is a typical evolution of social structure, laying a foundation for Europe to move forward to modernization.

One of the primary causes for European medieval cities to become the stage of the Renaissance is that these cities were symbols of human agency and concentrations of capital, representing the decline of old relations of production and the rise of new relations of production. The traditional form of the European medieval life faded out during this period: "All these forms and patterns declined. A kind of extreme culture has been in a state of collapse. At the same time, in the certain field, new things are being produced, the trends are being turned and the tone of life will be changed."¹ In the evolution of the European urban Renaissance, the bourgeoisie emerged to revive the classical literature, creating a cultural tide of enlightenment, leading to the integration of capital, market relations, religious reform, urban social life innovation, and democratic political reform. The emergent class also worked to promote formation of a typical urban renaissance as representation of social progress. This had laid the political, economic, and cultural foundation for the emergence and development of capitalism.

¹John-Huizinga, translated by Liu Jun. *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. [M]. Beijing: China Art Press. P356 .1997.

From the perspective of urban social structural transition, the core of the European medieval urban renaissance is this: The emerging urban bourgeoisie put forth new mental and cultural modes and behavioral propositions on the pretext of classical culture in order to transform social values and value orientations and create a new social order, the core content of which is the development of capitalism. The 'revival' in this context means "an unprecedented liberation of the real-world knowledge and spirit."²

The liberation took on many aspects of social change. It also inversely acted on the spiritual existence of urban citizenry. Social transformation went in depth, especially when it got rid of the 'imperial power' and re-inspected the kinetic value as 'human.' It broke away from the shackles of religion, theology, imperial power, and traditional ethics. It put forth personal values and cultural ideas of a secular civil society. The concept of 'humanistic' was creatively raised in the condition of an opposition to 'spiritualism,' fulfilling the potential of individual values. Urban civilization in accordance with social industrial progress developed. That is, urban lifestyle and civilization with respect for personal values and classical cultural values become well settled in the industrial era.

From the general law of economic and cultural development, when a state or national urban culture has developed to a certain extent, or when the cultural power of civil society has really taken on the stage of history, a national cultural elite group will come together to innovate national history and artistic classics, making it the nation's cultural power for progress. The 'cultural revival' reflected by this "cultural regeneration" and innovation becomes a national driving force for social change.

City provides individual liberation. In this sense, it has not only gathered geographical attributes, but also spiritual and cultural properties, becoming a real site for individual values to gain recognition with rights and obligations in new social relations and institutions. In urban social relations, the contractual relationship serves as a 'personalized space field' for individualized behavior. The bond of the city with currency provides social mechanism and space for the creation of a personal value system for the individual. An urban individual must form an independent value system of culture and life. Individual liberation, especially in ideology and culture, has become specific cultural essence and function. Therefore, "liberation" of an urban individual is regarded as another central value in the literature of the medieval Renaissance in Europe. Here is a metaphor: If everyone's energy is liberated and realized, the

² Zhang Hongyan. The Revelation of City Renaissance in Middle Ages Europe—from the view of the Reconstruction of Human "Group Memory" and "City Culture Capital..." [J] *Exploration and Free Views*. P9-10. March, 2009.

achievement will be infinite. This recognition has become the foundation for the medieval society to march into modern era.

Enlightenment on China's Modern Urban Cultural Reconstruction

The city itself becomes a way of modern expression, as urbanization represents the modern process of society. Contemporary China is in a period of rapid social change and the city is a field where a combination of social development and cultural regeneration occurs. At the same time, it is the hatchery where social evolution relates to civilization. Social progress represented by contemporary urban spatial development and cultural regeneration is the most direct interpretation of China's social reform and development.

In China's modern urban reconstruction, one evident manifestation is that hardware investment has been the driving force, greater than urban social and cultural power. There is a lack of a cultural soul that supports urban cultural development, represents urban cultural character, and gives birth to urban civilization in the gorgeous shell of a modern city. The relationship between physical features built by material objects and human contents developed by the urban cultural soul is just like 'body' and 'soul' of the city. Only when 'body' and 'soul' are attached, can the city have the internal power to absorb the civilization of the time, produce intellectual support and promote sustainable development. Therefore, it is necessary to inject new, socially synchronized human contents into the city in China's urban construction.

In the book named "The City in History," Mumford discussed the appearance of urban space and personality, as well as the value orientation of social life. He wrote: "A man's house and possessions become as much a part of his complete personality as his knowledge and sentiments, his opinions and acts. If that is true of the individual, it is even more massively true of the community: for it was by means of new aesthetic structures that the city defined the new collective personality that had emerged, and looked with a fresh pride at its own face."³ Although urban residents are different in social status, "the most humble people in the city can relate themselves to the collective personality of the city so as to connect with the power and brilliance of the city." In Paris, even the most underprivileged people, like beggars, would say that I am a Parisian, which seems to be the same as the aristocracy who usually prefer to say that I am a Parisian in essence. It can be clearly understood that the Urban Renaissance in European medieval ages is also a

³ Lewis·Mumford. translated by Song Junling. The City in History. [M] Beijing: China Architecture & Building Press.P53.1989.

1 new creation of urban personality. Western medieval city enjoys 'legal
 2 personality,' and it not only has strong needs but also is at ease to promote
 3 sublimation and reconstruction of city personality under the restrictive
 4 contractual relationship with the Protestant ethic. As Rogers said in his article
 5 on multiculturalism and citizenship, "the fundamental starting point in the
 6 study of the relationship between civil rights and geography is that a citizen is
 7 always the citizen of a certain place." Recently the relationship issue about
 8 members of a community and the formal conditions of citizenship were put
 9 forward on the citizenship debate. What's more, the city is just the place where
 10 the sense of belonging, identity, as well as other profound problems occur. It is
 11 in such a condition that the city has become the place of 'active life.' As
 12 Hannah said, "positive life, like the human life in a state of active action, is
 13 always rooted in the human and the creation of the world. In other words, it can
 14 never separate from or surpass the world thoroughly. People and objects
 15 constitute the environment of every activity of human beings. Without such a
 16 place, human activities are nowhere to be found. In turn, if we were divorced
 17 from the world where we were born, the environment would also do not
 18 exist."⁴ The Renaissance is 'the active life' under the premise of a city. Urban
 19 people are looking for their own liberation including many aspects such as
 20 thoughts and behaviors, while searching for 'independent' and 'autonomous'
 21 humanistic life. Although it contains many ideal pursuits, the cultural force
 22 formed by this process will inevitably produce the power that the leader of the
 23 Renaissance cannot imagine in their life experience. History does not simply
 24 follow the individual behavior of the Renaissance, but it creates new social
 25 relations and social laws in the cultural integration of a whole society.

26 Therefore, the collective consciousness of the urban individual is the main
 27 impetus of awakening and construction of an urban culture. For the medieval
 28 renaissance in Europe, the typical guidance of a 'great master cultural elite' and
 29 overall participation of the urban elite greatly highlight the crucial effects on
 30 formation and development of the urban culture brought by the 'individual'
 31 dynamic.

32 After more than thirty years of cultural change and integration in China, an
 33 urban middle class is emerging. China's social class structure is undergoing a
 34 qualitative change. The middle class as a main segment is forming, and the
 35 spillover effect of their leisure life is acting on present China, which has made
 36 China's city display the characteristics of 'China's Urban Cultural Renaissance'
 37 in the fields of architecture, art, life, and culture. In particular, the revolution of
 38 life values shown in the middle class is in a positive period of gestation.

⁴ Chen Yangu, *Culture and Publicity*. [M].Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore Press. P57, 1998.

In terms of urban cultural reconstruction, contemporary China holds the social class foundation of an excellent traditional culture and the revival of cultural essence. It also has the characteristics of a full social stratum differentiation. Moreover, it is faced with deep-seated conflict, fusion, and cultural variation between Chinese and Western cultures. On the surface, contemporary 'China's Urban Renaissance' has taken on features of multiple fields, types, angles, classes and participation, bringing about profound realistic and historical significance in social cultural changes. It is vital for us to absorb the cultural and ideological core of the European Renaissance in such a historical stage.

First, a direct exchange of Chinese and Western cultures brings a new paradigm of human society and personal values in Europe. Subversion of the traditional outlook and values of the European centralist lead to the formation of a new human vision and commercial value. Politicians, militarists, artists, religious communicators, and businesspeople in many cities, such as Venice, Genoa, and Florence, are striving for trade between Europe and Eastern Mediterranean countries. Those businesspeople who have an excellent cultural vision have created wealth, becoming leaders of the new lifestyle of an urban civil society. In the meantime, they begin their commercial operations in the field of culture and art, creating the art pursuit of the leisure class. Similarly, the city as the businessmen's residence has created a kind of typical urban artistic life accompanied by urban trades. For instance, urban painting, architecture, music, literature, and other humanistic carriers have found new ways of expression, showing profound humanistic themes and interesting intentions. Today, the new East-West cultural exchange and collisions are taking place. China actively attends to it, which will be an important spiritual and cultural source of China's urban renaissance.

Second, modernization and diversification of urban life coincides with the spirit of urban corporation and citizenship. The formation of a medieval civil society in Europe was an important driving force behind overall social structural change at that time. As pointed out by Marx, 'urban citizens'—the predecessor of the bourgeoisie—constituted the practicing subjects in the city of Renaissance. According to Mumford, the fantasy of social contract in the 18th century was in fact meant to bring the political bases of the medieval town in line with economic principles⁵. Rousseau held high evaluation of the independence and pride of medieval towns in Geneva and elsewhere, for the town as a legal product was often based on the social contract of land owners, residents, and citizens. It's possible to say that the town was a product of a favorable deal to both sides, not as much of the ancient town—the product of

⁵ Lewis·Mumford. translated by Song Junling. *The City in History*. [M] Beijing: China Architecture & Building Press. P200.1989.

1 military conquest. The process of economic promotion and political
2 democratization after China's reform has also been accompanied by the
3 emergence and growth of China's middle class. The middle-class people who
4 have occupied the main crowd of citizens are also seeking for the landing of
5 their own cultural personalities and class consensus. Besides, their values,
6 spiritual pursuits, ideals, and beliefs as well as ethics and customs are often
7 shown in apparent urban cultural patterns.

8 Third, urban science and technology build upon cultural education. The
9 Renaissance in Europe was also a period of vigorous growth of natural and
10 cultural philosophies. Oxford's first college was founded in 1264. By 1400s,
11 there were more than 50 universities in Europe. College education provided a
12 steady stream of intellectual support for urban development. In addition, new
13 scientific culture and innovative thinking provided high-quality blood for urban
14 construction and cultural innovation. The city becomes the cradle of academic
15 studies, literary and artistic creations. China's high-quality universities are
16 concentrated in different cities, and these cities should provide a better
17 environment and a more favorable stage where cultures and thoughts reinforce
18 each other to stimulate intelligence, energies, and passions of a young
19 high-quality group represented by college students.

20 Fourth, urban business connects to international trade. The city's business
21 provides all—encompassing goods and services, making people free from
22 the confinement of traditional clan power. All the needs of the individual can
23 be realized through commercial exchange. In the sociological interpretation on
24 contemporary marital relations, it is noted that living needs that must be
25 realized through marriage in the past could be obtained through business
26 outsourcing in today's commercial society, Namely, living needs provided by
27 families bound by traditional marriage are no longer unique and necessary in
28 the commercial society. On the one hand, it reflects the change of urban
29 business on individual life. On the other hand, business exchanges bring about
30 new products, services, and ways of thinking. Driven by profits, innovative
31 behaviors by business enterprises, whether they are product innovation,
32 management reform, or service innovation, objectively promote modernization
33 of both urban life style and civic thought.

34 Last, reinterpretation of the concept of "individual" inheres in appreciation
35 of individual importance. In addition to visible social changes, as the core of
36 the spiritual heritage from the Renaissance, a concealed but firmed consensus
37 of consciousness has taken shape—"it is a science of man and society to
38 extend this new way of thinking to humans and structural reform of human
39 society." Throughout the Renaissance, people liberated their thoughts from fear,
40 superstition, and false faith, and the world had changed later. In modern society,
41 human nature has evolved from 'community man' to 'individual man'. In this

regard, Marx has correctly pointed out, "in the states of antiquity the political state makes up the content of the state to the exclusion of other spheres. The modern state is a compromise between the political and the non-political state." Therefore, in modern society where human has become the main force, individual consciousness should be more prominent than in any other previous times. The dynamic existence of individuals in the urban cultural context has become the basic cell of the urban cultural development. It is necessary for urban culture to care for individuals and meet the needs of humans.

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