

# SOCIAL SPACE AND GOVERNANCE IN URBAN CHINA

Bray, David. 2005. *Social Space and Governance in Urban China: The Danwei System From Origins to Reform*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 277 pp. ISBN 0-8047-5038-6

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Walls have been integral to social and spatial organisation throughout Chinese history – the Great Wall, walled cities and traditional Confucian courtyard houses are good examples. David Bray's study traces the origins, development and reform of a distinctive modern type of enclosed compound structure in urban socialist China – the *danwei* (work unit) – and addresses common conceptions about modernity, identity and the links between socio-spatial arrangements, political ideologies and governance.

The *danwei* emerged as the 'predominant urban spatial form' during a period of major construction and industrialisation in the 1950s. A walled compound holding anywhere from a few households to thousands of people, the *danwei* was the combined home and workplace and functioned as a self-sufficient and cohesive unit. Bray builds on Foucauldian genealogical methodology to analyse the *danwei* as a Chinese-specific socialist form of state and government – in terms of power, subjectivity, space and the operational principles of government (governmentality). By exploring the multiple and complex sources of influences that enable the formation of the archetypal *danwei*, he seeks to understand how the 'political and economic strategies of government in China have impinged upon the everyday lives of the urban population' (p.1).

## The wall

Based on a wide range of Chinese and western interdisciplinary scholarship, Bray's analysis critiques the often-applied totalising party/state-centred analysis of social phenomena and institutional practices, which approached the *danwei* as a functional extension – negative in its emphasis on control and containment – of the Communist government. Contrary to this tradition, Bray's interpretive approach defines walls as 'positive technologies productive of particular relations of spatial practice' (p.20), and the *danwei* as a realm of knowledge production. Bray draws on Henri Lefebvre's spatial analyses that emphasize not only physical space but also the imaginative and theoretical processes involved in thinking about and planning space.

*Danwei* space, Bray argues, is not merely an institutional formation that put Communist governing ideals into practice through mass mobilisation, socialist education and industrial production. The *danwei* also harbours collective groups and social relationships centred on work and production and extending to living spaces, everyday practices and collective notions of identity (collective subjectivity). The dynamic relationship between structure, ideology and everyday social practices created the foundation for what became the Communist *danwei* and was, as Bray shows, often fuelled just as much by ad hoc local circumstances as by governmental planning and intervention.

In traditional China (before 1911), walled cities (the realm of the imperial government) and household compounds (the Confucian family sphere) were the most significant spatial realms in terms of social and political organisation. These structures and socio-spatial interrelationships reflected and reproduced roles and positions within a hierarchy of social relationships congruent to Confucian-based cosmology. For example, the family patriarch lived in the centre building inside a family compound, with family members staying in visible realms around the courtyard in accordance with their ascribed roles within the family hierarchy. In this way the spaces within walled cities and family households policed and reproduced certain types of subjects based on a collective-oriented cultural cosmology.

In the Republican era Confucian norms were redeployed, albeit in new forms, in all sectors of the industrialising workforce. Native-place artisan guilds and other groups that modelled themselves on the structures and hierarchical relationships of the kinship system emerged, thereby facilitating practical workplace organisation as well as providing safety, welfare support and a surrogate family network for workers coming to the cities without their own family. Bray thus counters much western scholarship on modernity, which is often blind to cultural and historical context and argues that the shift to industrialised, urban modernity necessitates the emergence of an individualised, fragmented social persona. This was far from the case in modernising urban China, although the context and meaning of the Confucian collective

social logic did transform to accommodate the changing society.

## Danwei and communism

Chinese socialist governmentality developed during the Yan'an period, according to Bray, when the Communist party consolidated its powerbase in rural north-west China. The 'mass line' theory of revolutionary leadership and operational strategy, encouraged by financial and military necessity, advocated mobilisation of the grassroots with a minimum central input of resources. This contributed to the Communists developing production-oriented and largely self-sufficient localities based on the principles of the Confucian socio-spatial system but within a socialist ethos of a different sort of family: the socialist commune, and by extension, the Communist republic.

After 1949, Chinese planning of the urban environment, with the *danwei* as its core constituent, radically transformed the socio-spatial landscape. While aspects of social organisation retained a collective-oriented ethos derived from Confucian cosmology and socialist principles, the spatial logic that informed the building of the socialist Chinese city derived from a complex origin of European and Soviet urban planning theory. At its core was a theory born of the demands presented by urbanisation and population growth spawned by early industrialisation: better governance – including the socialist transformation of society. Economies were based on regulation of the urban environment. Principles based on Soviet-style communes, desirable for their economised and standardised design, were applied to the Chinese socialist project after 1949.

While it clearly borrowed the symbolic hierarchical structure to denote social relationships from traditional family compounds, the *danwei* space 'was designed to represent the centrality of collective labour and egalitarian social relationships that exemplified the socialist ideal' (p.125). The symbolic spatial order was reversed: the most revered space was the area visible and accessible to the masses, the courtyard opposite the entrance gate, while in the Confucian family household it was where the patriarch resided, tucked inside the central building.

## Danwei decline

With the socio-economic changes of the last two decades, the *danwei* has declined in importance and function. The locus of urban life has shifted to the streets, private enterprises and commercial shopping centres. Workers' day-to-day existence, once 'dominated by collectivized labour and communal consumption within the *danwei* compound...is now increasingly structured by an ethos of commodification and individual consumption...' (p.191).

The new unit of urban housing development emerging in the late 1980s, the *xiaoqu* (small district), exhibits many similar features to the *danwei*, such as internal communal self-reliance. But they are usually not connected to a workplace and residence in the *xiaoqu* is based on choice and the ability to pay for your home; thus income disparity and social networking rather than work and career-based connections emerge as the main catalysts for social relations. Bray suggests, however, that while market transition and reform have undoubtedly changed the urban landscape and social structures, the principle of enclosed communal living remains fundamental.

*Social Space and Governance in Urban China* is a fascinating probe into the origins of the socio-spatial form of urban planning and governance embodied in the *danwei*; Bray's analysis is thought-provoking and a welcome contribution to existing scholarship. The analysis could have benefited from closer attention to the concept and role of the state, which Bray addresses only briefly. Considerations of how what goes on outside walls informs what goes on within them, and of the relationships between neighbouring *danwei*, may also have enlightened. Nevertheless, for anyone interested in Chinese culture and history, this study is a highly insightful read and an important contribution to current debates on the complex interconnections between modernity, space and social change. ◀

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