

LEARNING FROM EAST ASIAN HERITAGE AS AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. To the people of East Asia, modern development has been the realization of Western views of man and nature over the traditional environment which was built based on totally different cultural values. Most urban areas of East Asian cities are already dominated by modern development, therefore, traditional artifacts and edifices are left as segregated islands of heritage. This paper aims to identify the attitude of development that can be learned from traditionally built heritages of East Asia as opposed to modern development. The hope is that, based on learning from traditional development, which is based on organic view of the world, we can re-direct our future development in a more balanced manner. It seems obvious that the attitude of modern development, which is based on mechanic view of the world, needs to be critically revised, such that a more balanced approach between a mechanic and an organic attitude is attained.

1. Urban development and heritage sites

Modern history in Asia, has affected tremendous change in urban configurations from the traditional urban landscape to the modern cityscape with high-rise buildings. The process of modern change, which was generally understood to be a more developed achievement than traditional setting, took place largely in the 50 years of the second half of the 20th century. During this period of change, it was not easy for Asians to objectively identify the real cultural value and meaning of the impact of modern urban development, which actually was quite a shocking experience compared to the long-lasting traditional urban landscape. The present situation of Asian cities, is one in which only some significant cultural heritage sites remain, as heterogeneous islands within the areas of wide-spread modern development. This paper intends to question the validity of modern development - not from the viewpoint of Western modernity, but from the position of raising awareness of the residual heritage islands still extant in Asian historic cities. The discussion will deal with more conceptual issues than concrete urban aspects, and therefore, the argument will rely more on general understanding or cultural commonalities of historical cities rather than factual features. The reason why the paper limits the discussion into the cities of East Asia, is because, besides the reason that they are more familiar to the author, they share similar cultural background which is uniquely different from the Western culture.

The drastic urban change during the 20th century, for

Asians, was less a process self generation, but more a process of historical inevitability. During the course of urban development of the 20th century, Asians were enforced to understand the urban change based on the standard of Western modernism, therefore viewing the changed urban scene from the point of traditional culture was not easily possible. In the 21st century, Asians should be able to reevaluate the present urban condition in more objective perspective. But the question is what should be the viewpoint and standard of such evaluation. If we adopt the viewpoint of Western modernity, we can only justify the reality of modern urban condition as developed stage from the traditional stage of under-development. The traditional urban environment, however, is not necessarily under-developed situation, but are the cases developed in different value system and world view. Therefore, we are tempted to view the modern urban development, which represent Western value more heavily than the values of Asian locality, from the viewpoint of traditional urban environment. Modern change and traditional environment cannot be lined up according to one-dimensional measuring scale of development and under-development, but they need to be understood based on the characteristics of spiritual value which determined the direction of the cities differently. This is the underlying reason why we suggest the attempt of evaluation of modern urban development from the viewpoint of heritage sites remaining in East Asian historical cities. We believe that the attitude of future urban development of the 21st

century needs not only the value of Western modernism, but also the value of East Asian tradition.

It is not easy, of course, to generalize the characteristics of numerous urban heritages of East Asian cities, as well as the values underlying those heritages. This discussion can only be a conceptual attempt to be able to help opening the cross-cultural understanding of modern urban change. No city can be free from its own cultural background. Instead, a city is a most synthetic expression of particular cultural system. Although the physical facts of the heritages are different, they share common natures of the cultural value, especially the spiritual value of worldview, which is totally different from that of the Western modernism. This fact of different spiritual value of worldview between the West and the East supports the necessity of our attempt despite the problem of generalization mentioned above. Modern urban development of the 20th century, too, needs to be understood from viewpoints outside of Western modernism for more balanced understanding of what they really were. The eventual goal we are aiming through this discussion is not just to criticize one from the viewpoint of the other, but to see the possibility of generating new model of urban development that might be more suitable for the future urban change. As a first step of pursuing the goal, the discussion intends to identify the meaning of urban development based on the attitudes pertaining to the remaining urban heritage sites. Urban development in the 21st century is in need of a significant recalibration of its strategies - not only for the preservation of heritage sites, but also for the direction of future development. As spiritual assets, the particularities of cultural views are not less important for development than the physical or economic consequences of heritage-related development.

2. New definition of urban development

Official designation of heritage is an inevitable method of preservation. In urban areas, however, such designation works more as a means of granting permission for development in undesignated areas. Historical cities as a whole and the invisible system of network have more significant heritage value than their separately designated parts. Modern development, which has already appropriated the majority of undesignated urban regions, and therefore left few islands of heritage, brutally devastated the traditional urban landscape to the point that it can never be restored. The values of heritage sites, which are safeguarded from such devastation, in actuality, conflicts with the values of modern development right next to them. Modern urban development, which once was believed to be the sign of progress, has been, in fact,

an imposition of Western views of man and nature on traditional Asian urban environments. Therefore, to be able to re-direct future development, it is necessary to re-identify the nature of urban development according to the values of traditional heritage, not necessarily to substitute one by the other, but to harmonize the two different ways of approach. Global spread of single value system is detrimental for mankind because human culture can only be meaningful when different value systems of different cultures can mutually compensate each other. No culture is complete by itself. An attitude of urban development based on one culture, by the same token, needs to be compensated by the attitude of different culture. In the past, "development" meant "progress". Nowadays, no one believes the substitution of traditional environment by huge concrete structures is a sign of progress. The utopian expectations and the hope of progress of modern development proved to be an unattainable fantasy if not a failure. Hence, evaluation of modern development needs to begin by questioning the very meaning of "development". Perhaps a more holistic concept and strategy of urban development is necessary. One can hardly achieve the goal of establishing wholly new system of urban development, but he can start by trying to newly define the meaning of "development". The logical clue for re-defining urban development can be found from the way those islands of heritages in the historical city were originally perceived, built, and managed. If urban development in East Asian cities, as well as cities in other parts of the world, can be approached in a way that is more sensitive to the spirit of local heritage, a more balanced and harmonized relationship between the conflicting values of Western modern and traditional Asian can be achieved. This preliminary discussion is focused on defining what should be the meaning and value of urban development from the viewpoint of East Asian traditional urban heritages. The following five points are the issues raised for the purposes of such objective :

- **1) "Development vs. transformation":** Development should not mean total replacement of the old by the new, but "adequate transformation", because respect of the past instead of negation of the past has to be the background motivation for development. Modern development has excessively justified human interference over history and nature.
- **2) "Creation vs. generation":** Man's total creation based on human knowledge should not be a justification of all aspects of urban change, as human intervention should allow for the autonomous processes of the natural

environment and the self-generative systems of existing conditions. Sustainable development should be able to allow for change to happen, rather than creating all changes itself.

- 3) *“Space vs. space-time”*: Development should not be a one-time action of spatial imposition of man-made structures, but an approach that allows gradual change in spatio-temporal cycle. Modern development neglected the importance of balance between space and time by trying to create spatially satisfying condition.
- 4) *“Mechanic function vs. life interaction”*: The efficient resolution of functional problems is an important consideration, but, at the same time, the life quality of the man-environment interaction should be emphasized as well. Because an urban environment is also a living organism, its function is not only a mechanical arrangement but also involves the interactive and organic relationships of “life”.
- 5) *“Man-centeredness vs. holistic totality”*: Modern development observed man-centered attitude, which inevitably, damage the balance and totality of the man-environment relationship. Because man is not the owner of the earth, but merely a visitor and participant, a man-centered attitude is not a desirable way to achieve holistic totality.

3. Mechanic vs. Organic

The five points mentioned above are not about the method of development but the concept of development. Whether the five points objectively represent the values of Western and Asian development concepts is, perhaps, debatable. It should be recognized, however, that there is no single concept of development that is universally applicable. Instead, all concepts of development, including those of Western modernity, are culturally conditioned approaches from the very beginning, and therefore, represent particular cultural views of the world. The five points, mentioned above, are, at least, one possible effort to describe the different values between the West and the East Asia. As long as the underlying spirit can be agreed, the details of expression of the five points could be amended if necessary. During the course of modernization of the 20th century, Asians directly borrowed the concept of modern development, as denoted here by keywords such as “development”, “creation”, “space”, “mechanic function”,

and “man-centeredness”, and directly applied these concepts to the development of their historical cities. In such attitude of development, the environmental qualities of traditional value, as denoted by the keywords such as, “transformation”, “generation”, “space-time”, “life interaction”, and “holistic totality” were relatively ignored. The five pairs of keywords, by themselves, imply different direction of urban development from that of Western modernism.

The more important question here concerns the validity of the characteristics of the different worldviews upon which the concepts of development were conceived rather than the validity of the keywords. Although it is not easy to summarize the characteristics of the worldviews with single words, terms such as “mechanic”, representing the Western, and “organic” representing the East Asian, can serve the purposes to a certain degree. There is no clear cut division between “organic” and “mechanic” attitude, but one can only apply the terms to designate rough tendencies of general characteristics. At least, it seems sufficient to say that, in the value system of East Asian culture, man-made environment was understood as an organic part of the holistic totality, whereas, in the value system of Western modern culture, urban development is basically conceived as a type of mechanic device to satisfy new urban functions. Of course, such an idea of modern development of the West is rooted in the Newtonian understanding of the mechanic worldview, while, the East Asian approach is grounded in the traditional philosophy of Chi(氣) as well as sky-earth (天地) cosmology. After all, we end up discussing the validity of the “mechanic” and “organic” approaches of urban change as represented in modernized urban areas and in heritage islands of historical cities. No one can insist that one approach is more valid than the other. The only reality that cannot be denied is the fact that most historic cities have already been developed by mechanic approaches leaving limited island areas of heritage sites, which were more organically generated before modern developments took place.

In between the two approaches, the organic and the mechanic, the fundamental question may be that whether desirable urban development requires the qualities of one of the two, or both. It is for sure that modern cities needed new resolution for new urban functions which can never be achieved without mechanical approach. During the period of world-wide modernization, mechanical approach was widely justified not only in urban development but also in all aspect of modern life. If the value of urban development should be based on the balance between organic and mechanic approach instead of one of the two, the real question that needs to be asked is not

the validity of mechanic approach but the validity of organic approach, since organic approach is not familiar at all as an approach of urban development. This is to ask whether man's living environment, originally, requires organic quality as well as mechanic quality. We believe that the present symptoms of man's living on earth, including the problems of weather change and environmental sustainability, answers the question. The argument being made here is that future development in the 21st century should be shifted toward a more organic approach, thus allowing the two viewpoints to achieve more of a desirable balance. It is to say, in the course of our discussion, that urban change needs transformational quality as well as developmental, quality of self-generation as well as man's creation, quality of space-time as well as space, quality of life interaction as well as mechanic function, and the quality of holistic totality as well as man-centeredness.

4. Learning from East Asian urban heritage

One might argue that if such ideas of development based on an organic worldview are accepted as a new attitude toward development, urban development itself will not be possible. Perhaps, one could insist that the modern way of development should not be prevalent as it had been in the 20th century, because organic approach will resist total replacement of the old by the new. Development of total replacement could serve for mechanic function but it can damage the life interaction and relationship between the old and new that is necessary for holistic totality. Man's intervention on earth in the 20th century must have respected the principles of organic approach, such as we have described in five points, to be able to preserve sustainability of both man and the earth. Mechanic approach is very effective to satisfy short-term man-centered function, but it is not effective at all for long-term sustainability of man-nature relationship. Mechanic approach, from the very beginning, must have been applied in harmony with organic consideration. Organic approach is to respect the value of life. Man's development of total replacement on earth is not the symbol of progress but the symbol of negation of life. The world where man live, is not just a mechanic composition, but an organic system of life. If so, man's development, too, cannot be an act of mechanic replacement, but organic transformation. We are not, however, positing a choice between the two, also we do not want to under-evaluate the value of mechanic approach. Mechanic approach need to be pursued in the future as well, but in modified and balanced manner. Modern development is not

something that has totally failed or is fundamentally wrong either. However, the real problem is the degree of one sidedness of mechanic approach leaving out the necessity of the other side of organic approach. Whether the heritage sites in the historical cities represent the ideal balance between the organic and mechanic could be controvertible. Heritage sites might not necessarily be the ideal cases of such balance. We can, at least, observe the way life quality is respected in man-made environment. No one can deny the fact the heritage sites employed more organic approach than the modern development. Still, it is not only desirable but also impossible to try to achieve the urban development according to the way of traditional heritage sites. Through modern history, the mechanistic worldview served mankind tremendously, and we all deeply appreciate the contribution of the machines. At the same time, it should not be too late for man to realize the fact that the balance between the two attitudes is not a matter of choice but a matter of survival. As we all know very well, without the effort to balance the drive of mechanically based development with a more organic approach, the future of human sustainability is not going to be guaranteed. It is the responsibility of mankind of this period to find proper way of balancing the two.

Human body includes mechanical function, but it is so within the system of life. The earth as well, includes mechanical function, but it is so within the system of life interaction among all constituent parts. Both man and earth include mechanic function but it should be able to work within the self-sufficient system of life. Human settlement on earth is not segregated place of living independent for itself, but it has to be an organic part of the environmental totality. During the period of modernization of the 20th century, man neglected the side of life interaction concentrating heavily on the side of mechanic efficiency. Mechanic function, from the very beginning, must have been achieved within the realm of interactive relationships of life. The organic approach, after all, is a life-conscious attitude of development. The pairs of keywords mentioned above: "development vs. transformation", "creation vs. generation", "space vs. space-time", "mechanic function vs. life interaction", and "man-centeredness vs. holistic totality" are, in fact, representational ideas of mechanic and organic worldview. Mechanic side comes from man, and it is strong in enhancing efficiency. Organic side is not from man but existed from the beginning of the earth. This is why man's mechanic devices should be able to remain harmoniously within the order of existing organic system. In the 20th century, man succeeded in creating mechanic artifacts, but failed in harmonious coexistence with the organic totality.

Man creates and develops according to what he knows, but his knowledge is limited to the side of mechanical function. Man did not know that his knowledge alone cannot be the justification of his development. On the contrary, man's knowledge can never reach to the level of understanding the mechanism of the whole life system of the nature, and this is the reason why organic approach could not go easily together with mechanic approach. Mechanic approach is what man can do, but organic approach cannot be done in the same way as mechanic. To be able to implement the organic approach, it is necessary for man to respect and follow the existing way of life rather than create and develop on his own. Another words, man can be proud of the mechanic achievements he made, but, he needs to be humble to be able to follow the way of life that have been existed from before the existence of man. Man creates machine, but life transforms itself through a generative process, not only in space but in spatio-temporal sphere. After all, throughout modern development, man's creation has been man-centered mechanical intervention which disturbed the order of the overall life system of holistic totality. Hence, man should newly learn how to follow the way of life and how to harmonize the mechanic and organic. It is very grateful for man to have those heritage sites remaining in historical cities, since they are the examples of such harmonization.

To be able to move forward in the direction of a desired balance between the mechanic and the organic, learning from the traditional heritages that remains in historic East Asian cities can be effective

references. The value of urban heritage in modern Asian cities, in this sense, is the value of the underlying worldview upon which traditional cities were perceived and built. Whether or not man can learn the lessons of the organic approach from an East Asian worldview implemented in heritage sites is likely a critical issue for the sustainable future of not only urban development but also human existence. Based on such learning, however, we hope to be able to, at least, re-direct our future development in a more balanced way, and eventually set up an alternative model of development that is different from that of the modern model of urban development. A revision of the mechanic model of modern development in the direction toward the organic model, of course, is necessary not only for Asian cities but for all cities on earth. For this purpose, we should be able to listen to the silent voice of the heritage islands in historical cities. If this assertion makes sense, it should be noted that the necessity of re-balancing between the mechanic and the organic approaches is not only applicable in the area of urban development, but also in most areas of modern life, and it should include all aspects of physical, social, and mental levels that underwent serious change during the period known as the "modern" movement. Perhaps modern man himself needs such re-balancing as well to achieve an ideal and holistic status of existence. Heritage can work as a driver of development and, at the same time, heritage can work as driver of human development and survival.

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