

XXVIII International Seminar on Urban Form  
ISUF2021: URBAN FORM AND THE SUSTAINABLE AND PROSPEROUS CITIES  
29<sup>th</sup> June – 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2021, Glasgow

## Transformation of Municipal Squares in Early Reform-era China, 1994-2006

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### Abstract

*Reform and opening-up profoundly changed the urban image and urban life in China. One of the most conspicuous phenomena was the nationwide boom of municipal squares in the early reform era. With clear authoritative representations, the municipal square is a concrete manifestation of the top-down political-economic reform. By comprehensively analysing gazetteers of major Chinese cities and specific case studies, this article aims to examine the transformation of municipal squares from the lenses of form and physical environment as well as function and use, highlight their legacies and changes, and elucidate the relationship between political-economic reforms and publicly owned and managed public spaces. Most municipal squares built in the 1990s were reconstructed from historical squares located in urban central areas and are relatively small in scale, designed with a fixed form and a high greening rate. Commercial facilities were usually separated from the square by a road or different floors, and cultural facilities built in or around the square mainly included museums and auditoriums. With the goal of building 'international cities', many municipal squares built after 2001 belong to large-scale developments of new urban centres with comprehensive functions. Axes of organising space and buildings, separation of municipal squares and commercial facilities, and an emphasis on the greening rate are two legacies inherited from the 1990s. Functions and uses became more diversified, and the municipal square changed from an independent and dominant element to one important component of a large-scale development. The transformation of municipal squares in early reform-era China embodied changing political, economic, environmental, and cultural goals, and the connotations of municipal squares have evolved to be less political and more pluralistic.*

**Keyword:** urban form; municipal square; political economic reform; China

### Introduction

The policy of reform and opening-up ushered China into a new era. At the 14<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1992, the term 'socialist market economy' was first introduced to describe the goal of China's economic reforms, and from then onwards, the urban image and urban life of Chinese cities started to experience rapid changes. One of the most conspicuous phenomena was the nationwide boom of municipal squares in the 1990s. With clear authoritative representations, the municipal square is a concrete manifestation of the top-down political-economic reform. After China's entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, the country's integration into international production networks and global value chains not only created dramatic economic growth in Chinese cities but also new developmental discourse in the planning and design of municipal squares. Therefore, differences exist in the practices of municipal square construction before and after 2001.

This research specifically investigates two representative municipal squares during the period between 1995 and 2006: People's Square in Shanghai, which was completed in 1994, and Civic Square in Shenzhen, which

was completed in 2006. By comprehensively analysing gazetteers of major Chinese cities and specific case studies, this article aims to examine the transformation of municipal squares from the lenses of form and physical environment as well as function and use. The goals are to highlight their legacies and changes as well as to elucidate the relationship between political economic reforms and publicly owned and managed public spaces.

## **Background**

Municipal squares provide ideal cases for examining the transition of top-down urban development issues. Many researchers have studied the transformation of squares to investigate China's urban change in the transitional era. For example, Cartier (2002) examined the production of new urban landscapes in Shenzhen through the planning and design of Shenzhen's new city centre, which contained Civic Square. Cao (2005) studied the 'square boom' in the late 1990s to reveal the main motivation and problems of square construction during this period. Peng (2011) researched how political forces influenced the form of municipal squares after the reform and opening-up. Ye (2013) studied the historical transition of the physical environment of city squares from the 1980s to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century through three aspects, namely the surface, boundary, and square furniture. Zhang (2016) explored the urban spatial changes and cultural competitions through different periods of Shanghai by conducting a case study on People's Square. Gaubatz (2019) conducted a case study on New China Square in Hohhot to explore the manifestations of three aspects of Chinese urban change, namely the desire to foster urban development, produce environmentally sustainable cities, and foster a healthy society.

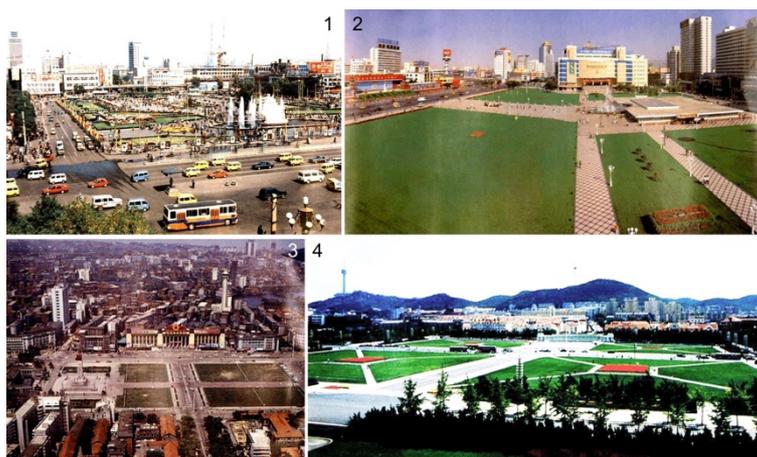
Relevant studies have mainly focused on municipal squares in on particular period. Therefore, the transformation of municipal squares from planned-economy era to market-economy era requires further research. Moreover, most studies did not pay enough attention to the relationship between municipal squares and surrounding facilities, especially commercial facilities.

## **Municipal Squares in the 1990s**

The Western civic square, which was introduced to China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by German and tsarist Russian planners in Northern China, did not achieve significant development immediately. In the Republic of China, squares were usually built at intersections of main roads as roundabouts, such as Xinjiekou Square in Nanjing and Jie Fangbei central square in Chongqing. During the pre-reform era of China, many squares were constructed or reconstructed in the 1950s and 1960s for mass rallies, such as Baqu Square in Harbin and Dongfanghong Square in Lanzhou. Most mass-rally squares had no greening, and some were a part of main roads that were temporarily used for mass rallies and left as voids in cities most of the time (Gaubatz, 2008).

Entering the 1990s, along with the rapid development of the economy and urban construction, local governments across the country enthusiastically participated in square construction to improve the urban image and physical environment for people's everyday lives, leading to city squares thriving in numbers, forms, and functions (Peng, 2011). Thousands of squares were built during these years (Liu, 2001); for example, Dalian—the most typical city that set the trend—relocated more than 100 factories out of the central urban area and reconstructed them into squares and green areas, and by 2000 it had already constructed 50 new city squares (Gazetteer Office of Dalian, 2006).

### Form and Physical Environment



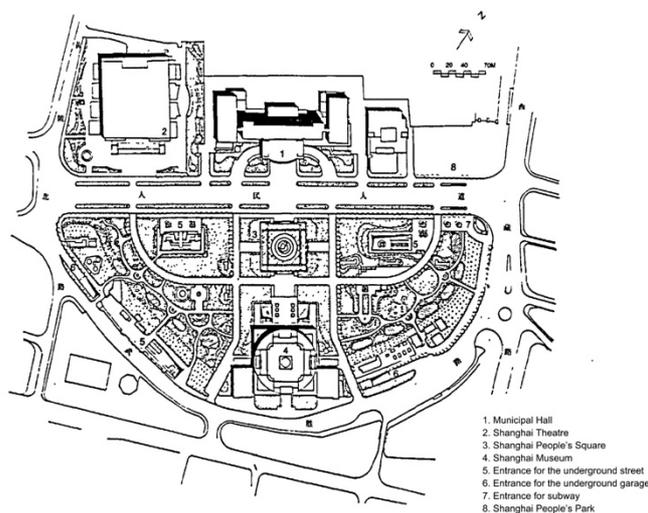
**Figure 1.** Representative municipal squares reconstructed in the 1990s: (1) May 1<sup>st</sup> Square in Taiyuan; (2) Dongfanghong Square in Lanzhou; (3) August 1<sup>st</sup> Square in Nanchang; and (4) People's Square in Dalian. (Compiling Committee for Real Property Records of Taiyuan, 1999; Compiling Committee for Local Records of Lanzhou and Compiling Committee for Municipal Construction Gazetteer of Lanzhou, 1997; Nanchang Toponym Office, 1992; Local Records Office of Dalian, 2006)

Municipal squares, with clear symbolic representations and visual orders, usually differ from commercial squares in both forms and uses. According to *City Square Design* published in 1999, municipal squares were usually planned near municipal government office buildings in administrative centres, providing places for the government and citizens to communicate and conduct gatherings; furthermore, the publication indicated municipal squares should be distant from commercial districts to avoid commercial advertisement, noise, and crowds as well as to maintain their own atmosphere. As for the design of municipal squares, a fixed or clichéd spatial configuration was formed in the late 1990s and became popular nationwide. Most municipal squares had a backdrop of government office buildings, employed axes to organise symmetric spaces, and were decorated with statues, flag-raising platforms, and large lawn areas. The emphasis on greening made them different from earlier mass-rally squares, which were empty and dull; moreover, the space configuration was still dominated by symmetry, and national homogeneity implied the negligence of local contexts.

Generally, these municipal squares reconstructed during the city square boom of the 1990s have three distinguishing characteristics (Figure 1). First, most municipal squares received politically significant names. For instance, People’s Square refers to the interests of people; May 1<sup>st</sup> Square shows respect for the working class; and August 1<sup>st</sup> Square commemorates the founding of the People’s Liberation Army, and these were very common names for squares nationwide, especially before the 1980s. Furthermore, most of these municipal squares were reconstructed from former mass-rally squares in central urban areas and inherited the places’ historical legacies. Compared with newly built squares, they were relatively small in scale and covered no more than 5 ha. Moreover, the square reconstruction in the 1990s placed great emphasis on greening. As the environmental imperative had become firmly rooted in the consciousness of Chinese urban planning, mass-rally squares were reimagined as important components of green urbanism (Gaubatz, 2019). This can be observed in the high greening rates of these reconstructed squares; for example, the reconstruction plan of People’s Square in Shanghai in 1993 included increasing the greening rate from 20% to 70% (Gazetteer Office of Shanghai and Contemporary Shanghai Research Institute, 2008).

### Function and Use

The market economy reform reintroduced leisure culture to urban areas, and the contents of leisure activities were largely depoliticised (Xing, 2011). Along with the rapid development of city squares, ‘square culture’ thrived in the latter half of the 1990s, and municipal squares provided an appropriate stage for government to conduct a series of weekend cultural activities such as art performances, concerts, dancing, and chess competitions (Wang, 1995; Wang, 1997).



**Figure 2.** Plan of People’s Square, Shanghai in 1994. (Source: Compiling Committee for the record of Surveying and Designing of Shanghai, 1998)

People’s Square in Shanghai is a pioneering case of the municipal squares reconstructed in the 1990s. The site of People’s Square was initially built as a race course by the English in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and was transformed into a mass-rally square in 1952. It covered 9 ha, only 20% of which was greening (Zhang, 2016).

In the 1980s, the government developed an underground space as a garage, subway, and commercial district. After the completion of the municipal hall and museum in 1992 and 1993, respectively, a project to reconstruct the square was launched in 1994. The design adopted an axis crossing the municipal hall and the museum to organise the square, and the greening rate was tripled. Furthermore, amenities such as fountains, flower beds, lamps, and statues were used to decorate the square (Figure 2). Since many old municipal squares are located in the central area of cities and thus enjoy convenient accessibility, they became strong choices for commercial development (Compiling Committee for the record of Surveying and Designing of Shanghai, 1998). After the underground commercial district had been built at People's Square, many cities followed suit, including Harbin, Wuhan, Gansu, Changsha, and Nanchang, which chose to utilise underground space for commercial development. Other cities such as Xin'an, Taiyuan, and Hefei reconstructed surrounding areas of their municipal squares into shopping malls and commercial districts. Notably, most projects followed the design principal mentioned in *City Square Design* and separated the commercial area from the square by locating them on different sides of roads or on different floors.

## **Municipal Squares Built after 2001**

### **Form and Physical Environment**

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a radical rethinking of square construction emerged in society. The first issue of *City Planning Review* published in 2002 featured 10 articles written by scholars, practitioners, and students, who discussed the 'square boom' phenomenon, and the topics ranged from the existing problems of city squares to their core values (Wang, 2002; Duan, 2002; Niu, 2002; Yu, 2002). Moreover, central and local governments started to deal with such issues. In 2002, the central government made it clear that new city square projects were prohibited from fiscal fund allocation, bank loans, and the acquisition of land use rights. In 2004, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Natural Resources, and Ministry of Finance released the *Notice on clearance and control of unrealistic wide roads and squares in urban construction*. The notice called for a pause to the construction of mass-rally squares over 2 ha and the establishment of a standard for the size of squares in the future.

In addition, as China joined the WTO in 2001, city brand marketing campaigns intensified and the goal of building an 'international city' or a 'world city' motivated many leading cities in China to develop a central business district and new green space (Gaubtz, 2019). Therefore, the policy of restricting the development of mass-rally squares did not actually limit the scale of new projects, but it did influence their design. Municipal squares built after 2001 are usually important components of large-scale developments of new urban centres with comprehensive functions. Furthermore, according to the abovementioned policy, many municipal squares largely increased their greening rate and minimised the area of pavement, making them



under the Chinese market economic reform. Covering an area of 16 ha, Civic Square not only constitutes a key component of Shenzhen Central District (SCD) but is also the most important public open space in the city (Figure 3). Established as a comprehensive centre of administration, culture, finance, business, and information, SCD is located in the geographical centre of Shenzhen and covers 607 ha. The northern part is the administrative district, including the Civic Centre, Civic Square, and five major public cultural centres, namely Monument Park, Shenzhen Concert Hall, Shenzhen Library, Shenzhen Teenagers' Palace, and the Exhibition Hall. The southern part is the central business district, including the Central Park, the Central Shopping Park, commercial complexes, and Shenzhen International Conference and Exhibition Centre. Similar projects include Civic Square in Hangzhou, Yinhe Square in Tianjin, and People's Square in Yinchuan (Figure 4).

## **Conclusions**

In the rapid urban development of the early reform era, municipal squares underwent an important transformation in form, physical environment, function, and use. Most municipal squares built in the 1990s were reconstructed from historical squares located in urban central areas and mainly have three features: they are relatively small in scale, they are designed with a fixed form, and they have a high greening rate. Commercial facilities were usually separated from the square by road or different floors, and adjacent cultural facilities mainly included museums and auditoriums. With the goal of building an 'international city', many municipal squares built after 2001 belong to large-scale developments of new urban centres with comprehensive functions. Two legacies were inherited from the 1990s and were strengthened: the axes remained an important approach for organising space and buildings and creating a sense of majesty, and the greater emphasis on the greening rate made the squares resemble parks. Functions and uses of such municipal squares became more diversified in that facilities introduced from the West, such as concert halls and galleries, became quite common. Moreover, while the separation of the square from commercial facilities remained clear, the municipal square has changed from an independent and dominant element to one important component of a large-scale development.

The transformation of municipal squares in early reform-era China embodied changing political, economic, environmental, and cultural goals. Coinciding with a sharp rise of leisure culture and the wide spread of globalisation under the market economy, the significance of municipal squares has evolved to be less political and more pluralistic.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have helped me during the writing of this thesis. I gratefully acknowledge the help of my doctoral supervisor Professor Nakajima Naoto for his patience,

encouragement, and professional instructions during the writing of my paper. Furthermore, I would like to thank Professors Lu Feng and He Baojie, who kindly offered valuable help and suggestions for this article.

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