

Shen J, 2003, *The Chinese City in Space and Time: The Development of Urban Form in Suzhou*, Xu Y (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), *Urban Geography*, 24(1), 92-93.

The Chinese City in Space and Time: The Development of Urban Form in Suzhou, Yinong Xu, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2000. 361pp. illustrations, index. \$47. Reviewed by Jianfa Shen, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

This book is a fascinating study on the city building and development in Suzhou, China from 514 B.C. to the early twentieth century by a scholar specializing in architectural and urban history using a historical approach. The book will be of great interest to scholars in the field of urban development and urban history especially on Chinese cities. The glossary and the Chinese references of the book are both in English and Chinese, a useful feature of the book.

China has a long history of urbanization. The spatial structure and administrative, social and economic organizations in ancient cities still have some influences in contemporary Chinese cities. Thus study on ancient Chinese cities is highly significant. The book has seven chapters. The first two chapters provide a historical context of Suzhou. Chapter three is a theoretical consideration of the Chinese cities in the imperial era dating from 221 B.C. after the Qin unification. The author offered a critical review of previous studies on several important issues including the difference between local cities and capital cities, the evolution of urban planning and governing principles, and the urban-rural relationship in ancient China. Chapters four to six examine the development of the walls and gates, the overall urban structure, the architectural forms and styles of buildings in the city in relation to those of rural areas and the use of public space respectively. Chapter seven discusses the interesting role of “fengshui (geomancy)” in the development and reading of Suzhou.

Most previous studies focused on the capital cities of ancient China. This book focused on a local city that helps understand the difference and similarity between a capital city and a local city. The author argued, based on various documentary evidences, that there were fundamental differences between them. Furthermore, the author found

substantial variations in space and time in local cities. These views were different from early ones that the local cities were only miniature of the capital cities and Chinese cities were essentially unchanged along the history.

Based on the case of Suzhou, the author argued that a city and its wall were inseparable. A walled city and a local capital actually referred to the same city in ancient China, as a Chinese city was not a corporate entity of its own but a government seat of the region under its administration. Thus a Chinese city could be moved to a new site as in the case of the temporary re-location of the city of Suzhou in A.D. 591. This was different from western countries where a thriving city would remain even if its capital function was moved to another city. The important role of government function in ancient Chinese cities has relevance even for the contemporary China.

What may be of most interesting to urban geographers and scholars on Chinese urbanization is the discussion on the urban-rural continuum across city walls. The case of interest was the continued development of the suburbs west of Chang Gate as the “central” business district for over four hundred years during the late imperial period. The author showed that the spatial dichotomy of the urban and rural as marked out by the city walls became blurred due to active commercial activities. The urban identification of the busy suburb was forged based on the competitive “urban milieu” rather than special legal and social status that persisted in contemporary China. After a length examination of the construction of city walls and gates in Suzhou, the author argued that city walls symbolized authority, order and security and were constructed or enlarged often after a settlement became a local center of imperial administration. Thus a walled city itself was not a judicial entity but a symbol and node of the territory under its administration. The significance of the building of city wall symbolizing the city lied in the psychological function of reaffirming the presence of the state especially in the first half of Ming dynasty. As a result, walled Chinese cities demonstrated remarkable stability in city form.

One significant contribution of the book is towards an understanding of the “medieval urban revolution” through the study of the changes taking place in the city of Suzhou. From late Tong to Southern Song, the urban space of the city transformed from an old system of clearly divided and walled residential and market quarters into a much freer street plan with mixed shops and houses. Three centers, namely the gentry and

official district, the business district and the district of textile industry, formed a new pattern of urban space partitioning from the Ming period onwards.

Due to limited information available especially for the early years, the author had to rely on conjectures for suggestive conclusions sometimes. Descriptions in poems that may not be as reliable and precisely as documentary records were also used as evidences to reconstruct the history of the city. For example, the author conjectured, based on the planning principle of the Tang, that the wards were probably enclosed by walls and supervised by officials in the city of Suzhou in the Tang dynasty (p. 132). For another example, the author relied on the poems of Bai Juyi in the 820s to infer that the walls of the wards may have been ceased bounding residences (p. 133). The readers may need to be careful to use these as solid evidences to further generalize the ancient Chinese cities. Another weakness is that the social and economic history of Suzhou was not examined in detail. The author was focused mainly on the buildings, constructions and spatial structure in the city although ample historical context and interpretations were provided throughout the book. Overall, the book provided a useful foundation for a through study of traditional Chinese cities using a historical approach.