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Post-Socialist Urban Development in East and Southeast Asia

Socialist Legacy in Beijing and Hanoi

Topic and Research Question

The research paper examines the transformation of socialist into post-socialist space in Beijing and Hanoi. The theoretical background stands that urban space is affected and produced by the political and socio-economic circumstances that it is embedded in. Consequently, socialist central planning systems altered the urban environment to perform certain functions, thus leaving a physical socialist legacy behind. Urban areas in former socialist countries have been exposed to market reforms for several decades. Thus the form and function of this physical legacy is now transforming, in order to meet the spatial demands of a market economy.

The paper examines two cities that have experienced periods of socialist governance: Beijing, People's Republic of China and Hanoi, Socialist Republic of Vietnam. By comparing the urban development in these cities, this research aimed to uncover two central points:

Did the socialist city also exist in East and Southeast Asian countries? And two, if it did, are the current transformations in East Asian cities in any way comparable to the transformations in Southeast Asian cities? Hence, the research question: *Is the transformation of socialist legacy in the urban environments in Beijing and Hanoi similar, and why?*

Contemporary researchers have come to the conclusion that there has been too little post-socialist research concerning cities outside the CEE region. My exploration aims to contribute to the question, whether the concepts socialist and post-socialist city are also valid on a global scale.

State of the Art

Several authors have compared socialist city elements across continental borders and different cultural contexts, see for example Boren and Gentile (2007), Kliems and Dmitrieva (2010) or Wasserstrom (2007). Yet, none have compared former socialist cities and their post-socialist development in East and Southeast Asian countries. Most comparative works on post-socialist urban Asia only cover the Chinese urban transition, see Wu and Yeh (2003; 2007) as well as Gaubatz (1999). Some authors concern themselves with the contemporary production of space in a particular East Asian country or on a smaller scale with a specific city. Braester (2010) and Kurfürst (2012) are worth mentioning with regard to Beijing and Hanoi.

Methodology and Approach

The method of research is a comparative case study approach. Hanoi and Beijing were selected because they are capital cities and experienced several decades of socialist rule. Their reform approach is similar since both regimes have allowed economic change, but implemented few political reforms. Both communist parties are still in power. I chose the inner city areas as spatial frame of reference. The comparison was conducted through an extensive literature research as well as with maps and various photo sources.

To establish whether Beijing and Hanoi had socialist legacy in their urban form, I had to determine what constitutes a socialist city. Five physical elements were particularly prominent in socialist urban planning, as it is understood in Central and Eastern European urban development literature. Their form and function was examined in the existing literature, with the result:

Socialist city focus areas of research in with key features	
City centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> one centre political, administrative and cultural functions large open space and wide streets for ceremonial purposes only little state-approved commercial activity
Industrial sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sites often located on inner city land industrial zones spread out over the whole city abandoned sites: not recycled, left as brownfields
Micro-district	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> planning unit self-reliant community provided basic services close to workplace undifferentiated by functions
Residential buildings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> standardised, prefabricated buildings modernist block design, cheap quality materials built in the periphery of historic city cores 5-15 storeys
Architectural heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> mostly abandoned, demolished only embraced when it fit with political ideology no funds for maintenance dedicated to new functions

The next step was to compare whether these elements occurred in Beijing and Hanoi during their time under socialist central planning regimes. Then, I analyzed how form and function in the urban morphology and land use patterns of these five urban elements have changed in both cities in the reform period. Finally, these changes were compared in both cities.

Main Facts

The production of space between the city under capitalism and under socialism differs. The ideal socialist city existed mostly in theory, however in reality only various parts of it were realized in different cities. This also applies to Beijing and Hanoi.

The amount of socialist legacy that cities have in their urban fabric depends on the economic and political circumstances that were in place while a country was socialist. Hanoi was not as comprehensively developed as Beijing due to the war years and the costs of the reunification with the South. Beijing's urban development was interrupted by Mao's more radical political campaigns. Despite historic differences in the cities' development, the five focus elements had a distinct socialist character.

This was, because Soviet urban planners brought their expertise to the redevelopment of both Beijing and Hanoi. Their knowledge had a lasting impact on urban planning in both countries. Especially in Beijing socialist city ideas got deeply entrenched in urban planning.

Both **city centers** were developed according to socialist urban principles and fitted with monumental architecture that housed political cultural and administrative functions. Tiananmen and Ba Dinh Squares serve as grand, open space for political spectacle and socialist rhetoric. They still retain some of these functions until today.

Industry used to be located close to residential areas and was distributed evenly in the city. Beijing had no specialized zones and Hanoi had only small ones to avoid creating large bombing targets. Industry has gradually moved out of the inner city and clustered into industrial zones, where land rents are cheaper.

The *danwei* complexes were the Chinese version of the **micro-districts** and were widely applied throughout Beijing. Contemporary Hanoi and Beijing are no longer homogenous, but different areas have different functions. However, the micro-districts have vanished.

Residential buildings - low to medium-rise uniform concrete blocks under socialism - have grown into skyscrapers, more so in Beijing. Due to the wars, Hanoi built less socialist housing. Private home development is still very common in Hanoi, while public housing occupies a lot of land in Beijing.

Architectural heritage was neglected in both cities under socialism and only in the reform period it has

been rediscovered. Hanoi is more generous with conservation efforts, whereas Beijing mostly saves principle monuments.

Results

Both cities shared a distinct socialist urban legacy in the five physical elements of analysis. The market environment had fairly similar effects on the socialist legacies of urban Hanoi and Beijing. The form and function in the research categories is transforming fairly correspondingly especially on the form, function and distribution of buildings. Public space has become very commercialized under market reforms, i.e. CBDs, entertainment complexes and shopping centers developed. The urban landscape has to cater to different urban consumers now. High-rise buildings, varied residential areas like gated-communities, luxury housing as well as industrial parks have appeared. Only the form and function of the city centre remains still fairly similar to former socialist times in both cities.

The differences in the post-socialist development mainly result from different land laws in the two countries. For example, industry in Hanoi can occupy valuable inner city land for free or for very cheap land rents due to state-subsidized land prices and has no financial incentive to relocate, while in Beijing it does.

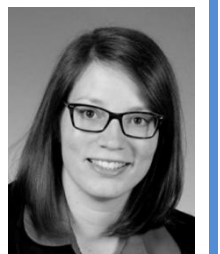
As the post-socialist urban environments and the socialist legacy in Beijing and Hanoi are comparable, my research contributes to the theory that the socialist/post-socialist city is a globally applicable concept.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://othes.univie.ac.at/>

About the Author

Tanja Weissensteiner holds a BA degree in China Studies from the University of Vienna and a post-graduate Diploma in European Spatial Planning and Development from KU Leuven. She is currently pursuing an MA in Spatial Planning. This research was part of the MA East Asian Economy and Society.



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