

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Socialist urbanism and cultural infrastructure facilities in China: Cities of the Pearl River Delta and the Guangzhou cultural infrastructure facilities plan, 2003–07

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## Abstract

The construction of “cultural infrastructure facilities” (*wenhua jichu sheshi*) in China – auditoria, exhibition halls, libraries, museums, performance centers – for state administration of culture and information originated in the 1950s with Sino-Soviet exchange and has continued throughout the reform era. However, scholarship on urban development in China, embedded in discourses of capitalism and modern planning, generally does not recognize this category of infrastructure construction by contemporary city governments. To address the lacunae, this article analyzes the history of cultural infrastructure facilities in socialist urbanism, their transfer to the People’s Republic of China from the Soviet Union, the conditions of socialist realism, and the continuity of cultural infrastructure construction since the 1980s. Evidence from the Guangzhou Cultural Infrastructure Facilities Projects Plan (2003 – 07) and cultural facilities sites in the new city center projects of Shenzhen, Shunde, and Dongguan demonstrate how the party-state prioritizes the planning and construction of cultural infrastructure facilities. Contemporary architectural designs for new cultural buildings represent the international aesthetic of reform while cultural facilities continue to house and display party-sanctioned culture and information for the people.

**Keywords:** City centers; Cultural infrastructure facilities; Socialist realism; Socialist urbanism; China

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**1. Introduction**

The architecture, built environment, and general space of a city, its layout and forms, represent the nature of its urbanism, and how urbanism evolves with the institutions, principles, and values, both material and symbolic, of the society that conceives and constructs the city. The idea of Chinese urbanism compels and challenges epistemological organization due to the depth of urban history in China and the tendency in scholarship to conform to types of cities and periodization of urbanism based on historical eras.

An unstated conceit in urban research is that a city belongs to a historical type or category based on the period of the prevailing political economy in which it becomes instantiated and develops. Research practices tend to adopt these conventions rather

than question them. Scholarship on city types, from medieval to industrial and neoliberal, among many others, characterizes the literature. Chinese history claims a similar epistemology with imperial cities, sub-categorized by dynasty, Republican-era city, Mao era city or socialist city, and reform-era city.

This article problematizes the periodization of city types and categories of urbanism to intervene in the assumption that socialist urbanism in China ended with the development of cities in the reform era. The political economy of reform decentralized decision-making and marketized economic activity, introducing state capitalism while establishing the space for hundreds of new cities. Rapid urbanization ushered in ideas from city and regional planning based on the capitalist city, with subsidiary language and terms from new-build gentrification to economic zones decorating the discourse. However, the widespread adoption of so-called global urban theory has also masked more complex realities about conditions of socialist urbanism in China (Cartier, 2024).

The expanding arena of scholarship on the formative decade of the 1950s features research on cities and socialism and rural-urban relations (Brown, 2012; Gao, 2004; Hirata, 2023; Hou, 2018; Li, 2018) including studies of architecture and the built environment, and state design and construction firms (Ding, 2021; 2023; Li, 2014; Roskam, 2015). Its temporality, embedded in the time of the planned economy, circumscribes socialism and the city within the Mao era. Accounts of the post-Mao era chronicle the demolition of *danwei* (单位), or work-unit compounds for commodity housing and new commercial precincts (Bray, 2005; Lu, 2006). Yet since socialism is an enduring official political-economic philosophy of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and some fundamental institutions from the era of the planned economy – state ownership of land and the *hukou* (户口), or registered permanent residence system – have transformed but not discontinued in the reform era (Chan & Wei, 2019), is it also possible to identify continuing elements of socialist urbanism?

Recent scholarship on the history of architecture and design firms in China suggests the potential. In the early 1950s, architectural firms became consolidated in state-owned design institutes that would rebuild the country for socialist industrialization under party-state authority. Hu (2021) shows how Soviet advising in the 1950s introduced the Soviet model of state design institutes for architectural reconstruction to the PRC. These institutes consolidated “all construction-based design disciplines,” including architecture, landscape architecture, and construction engineering, into integrated design and construction

institutions under party leadership (Hu, 2021, p. 107). In the process, material construction of the built environment became a demonstration of socialist urbanism and an extension of the ideology of socialist construction.

Like other state-owned companies, China's design and construction firms have marketized elements of their practice in recent decades, yet they have not dissolved. The state design institutes have continued under reform. They plan and build major infrastructure projects including iconic buildings attributed to renowned international architects. “While the creation of high-profile public projects such as urban developments, skyscrapers, grand theaters, libraries, museums, and galleries has largely been credited to internationally celebrated architects and companies, China's state-owned design institutes” are the “main forces” in development and construction (Xue & Ding, 2018, p. 113). Theater, library, and museum buildings constitute cultural infrastructure facilities in the city. Their development by state design and construction companies points to the continuity of socialist construction of cultural infrastructure projects since the Mao era.

This article makes an argument for the historical continuity of socialist urbanism in China based on the state construction of “cultural infrastructure facilities” or *wenhua jichu sheshi* (文化基础设施) in the reform era. It demonstrates the continuity and significance of cultural infrastructure facilities from 1949 through the reform period and up to the present. It examines the origins of cultural infrastructure facilities in the transfer of socialist urbanism from the Soviet Union to the PRC and identifies the importance of design aesthetics in the production of cultural facilities based on the theory of socialist realism. The empirical account draws for contemporary evidence on cultural facilities planning and construction in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province, and cities of the Pearl River Delta region, namely, Shenzhen, Shunde, and Dongguan. The analysis shows that even in the leading region of reform, state planning of cultural infrastructure facilities has endured.

In “The Search for the Socialist City,” Kotkin (1996) recognizes the dynamic nature of the city under socialism as the site for the construction of socialist goals and ideals, as well as the elusiveness of defining socialist urbanism amidst debate over the socialist path. Socialism is subject to reinvention and by party elites, and so are its cities. In “What Was So Socialist about the Socialist City?” Zarecor (2018, p. 95) reflects on the contemporary existence of socialist built environments and urges an examination of how “the socialist scaffold has continued into the era of neoliberalism.” She approaches a definition of socialist urbanism where she writes, “The universal aspiration

for a socialist city was that it operated continuously as a synchronized instrument of economic production and social transformation in physical space.” In the classic essay, “Planning the City of Socialist Man,” Fisher (p. 252) defines the socialist city as “the core of the ideal communist community” based on new forms and spaces that show “the inherent unity of the people.” Recognizing that the reform era did not end the relation between socialism and the city compels questions about what has continued (Müller, 2019).

Following this introduction (Section 1), Section 2 introduces communist party authority over the cultural sphere, the origins of cultural infrastructure, and the forms and functions of the socialist built environment. Section 3 examines the transfer of cultural infrastructure facilities development to the PRC under Soviet advising, and the types of facilities and their construction during the Mao era. Section 4 identifies more than visual properties of socialist realism, including dynamic qualities of space and time, in the design and construction of socialist urbanism. Cultural infrastructure facilities in new “city centers” are subjects of Section 4, with evidence of cultural facilities planning and construction in Guangzhou and cities of Pearl River Delta region, based on periodic site documentation since the early 2000s. The empirical analysis focuses on comprehensive cultural infrastructure planning in Guangzhou, based on the Guangzhou Cultural Infrastructure Facilities Projects Plan (2003 – 07), and compares cultural infrastructure development in Shenzhen, Dongguan, and Shunde to show variation and continuity in cultural facilities development. The conclusion (Section 5) summarizes the limits of treating the reform era breakpoint as if a one-way transition to post-socialism, and affirms the continuity of elements of socialist urbanism in China.

## 2. Socialist urbanism and the origins of cultural infrastructure facilities

In the history of socialist urbanism, cultural infrastructure facilities are buildings that house and present state-curated culture and information for the people. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) control over culture and information, and its transmission, began in January 1949, nine months before the founding of the PRC, when the CCP established the Committee to Control Cultural Affairs to organize cultural institutions under party control (Hung, 2011). After October 1949, the new PRC government established the Ministry of Culture with governing control over cultural institutions and their built environments in cultural infrastructure facilities.

The planning mandate for the construction of cultural infrastructure facilities exists within the political-economic

philosophy of socialist general planning (Hoffman, 2003; Reiner & Wilson, 1979; Wakeman, 2014). Its political-organizational capacity depends on both ideational and material socialist construction – both the vision, adjusted to suit emerging futures, and material development, through multiple forms of construction – to socialize, mobilize, channel, monitor, and acculturate the populations. The material history of cultural infrastructure construction became formalized in the early 1950s in China, with the establishment of state architectural design and engineering institutes. Thus, in the relationship between the city and infrastructure construction, urban infrastructure development is not accessory to the city or simply located in the city; the construction of infrastructure should anchor, contour, and propel the transformation of society and economy.

The originating history of the significance of material construction for socialist construction traces to the 1930s. In review of the first 5-year plan (1928 – 32) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the Soviet leadership observed, having laid the “‘foundation’ of socialist society...it was time to construct its ‘edifice.’” Planning turned to focus on architectural design for construction of new cities, Clark (2003, p. 4-5) explains, in which “rebuilding of the Soviet city came to stand in for the moral and political transformation of the entire society into a communist one.” Building new cities and rebuilding existing ones has defined the material construction of socialism and socially constructed regime legitimacy.

The 1935 Moscow General Plan established concepts for model cities nationwide. The Soviet Union built over 900 new towns, planned regional development based on functional areas, and coordinated rapid “city-building” for industrial modernization (Parkins, 1953; White, 1979). Functional zoning, characterized by industry-specific spatial concentration, and the planning and construction of superblocks for entire neighborhoods, are indicative of socialist forms of urban and regional planning. The significance of socialist planned urbanization for industrial development made a new city an ideal city that transfers modernizing principles to society.

The Soviet urban model prioritized new city centers featuring government buildings for administration and display of socialist standards and ideals. “Rather than a buzzing downtown with Western-style traffic and commerce, the center of the city was a measure of political man” writes Wakeman (2014, p. 108), a space of grand stateliness with “a formal geometric ensemble” that would contribute to “the mechanisms for social transformation.” She continues, “The ideal socialist city was a glimpse of tomorrow. It was imagined as a blank canvas on which a

utopian settlement could be designed and produced as a glamorous model of the future” (2014, p. 121). “The future itself was imagined as empty space that could be filled with abstract images, and ultimately with abstract citizens.” The “honorific and ideological city center” has been the standard centerpiece in socialist urbanism. This spatial model, a tabula rasa to be dominated by government buildings overseeing cultural infrastructure facilities, characterizes new city center projects in China.

## 2.1. Museology exchanges, exhibition centers, and auditoria

On the afternoon of October 1, 1949, the protagonists in what would become the years-long debate over how to redevelop Beijing for socialist modernization assembled on the Tiananmen Rostrum. In *Beijing Record*, Wang (2011, p. 40-43) records how Liang Sicheng, the eminent architectural historian, was there amidst a score of Soviet “experts in municipal administration” who were already dictating how Beijing should be reconstructed. Zhou Enlai, the new premier and head of government, walked to the corners of the rostrum and gesticulated toward the future. From the southeast corner, he pointed to the east and stated, “there should be a history museum – a huge structure – there” on the east side of Tiananmen Square. He walked to the southwest corner, pointed to the west side, and said, “the national grand theatre should be built there.” The People’s Republic was not yet a day old and the Chinese leadership had already envisioned the construction of cultural infrastructure facilities, in dialog with Soviet advisors, in the heart of the capital.

The first cultural infrastructure facilities in the PRC were a prominent subject of the Sino-Soviet exchange. In 1950, the committee in charge of planning the Museum of the Chinese Revolution, to be housed in the large-scale structure that Zhou envisioned, traveled to Moscow to study the Russian model of museums. This visit was the first of several Sino-Soviet museology exchanges (Hung, 2011). Since the project would shape the representation of CCP history, the Propaganda Department was directly involved. Its leadership worked on the basis of *jianshe* (建设) or construction that is both ideological and material – construction of material infrastructure in dedicated buildings and construction of cultural content for the portrayal of socialist values.

In the early 1950s, the Soviet Union sent about 10,000 advisors to serve in PRC ministries and departments (Bernstein, 2010). The plan for renovating Beijing as the capital city was developed under direct Soviet guidance (Sit, 1996; Wang, 2011). Beijing’s first major cultural facility was the Soviet exhibition hall, the *Sulian*

*zhanlanguan* (苏联展览馆), resembling elements of the Admiralty building, headquarters of the Russian Navy, in St. Petersburg. The Beijing *Sulian zhanlanguan*, exotic and conspicuous, was completed in 1954 for the Exhibition of Soviet Economic and Cultural Achievements, to coincide with Khrushchev’s first visit to China. This exhibition on Soviet material culture, with some 11,500 items portraying the exemplary future of socialist modernity, was the largest in the early history of the PRC (Li, 2014). The Soviet Exhibition Hall introduced to the PRC the concept of monumentality for leisure facilities that cultivates the advancement of socialism in society.

Soviet exhibition centers were also constructed in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Wuhan, where they were Sino-Soviet friendship halls. The geopolitical relationship between the two countries attenuated by the early 1960s, but the PRC split from Russian tutelage did not result in removal of the Soviet-era cultural infrastructure. The Soviet name in Chinese, *Sulian* (苏联), would be replaced by Chinese city names, yielding Beijing Exhibition Hall on the landmark Soviet-style building. The Shanghai Exhibition Center, originally the Sino-Soviet Friendship Hall, occupies a site in Jing’an, one of Shanghai’s most prominent districts. In Guangzhou, as Ding (2021, p. 977) documents, investment in the Guangzhou Foreign Trade Project, “one of the largest and most ambitious construction projects in 1970s China,” substantially extended the Guangzhou Sino-Soviet Friendship Building for the Canton Fair. The endurance of the friendship buildings amidst multiple rounds of urban redevelopment testifies to their importance in CCP history.

Modern architecture associated with Stalinist socialist realism became a general style for major buildings. Beijing’s most prominent projects in the Stalinist style, the Ten Great Buildings, famously constructed in record time to demonstrate socialist achievement, commemorated the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the PRC. Their grandiose size and speed of realization represented an “architectural manifesto for a political agenda” at the time of the Great Leap Forward (Xue & Ding, 2018, p. 47). The building on the east side of Tiananmen Square realized Zhou’s vision for a massive edifice to house the Museum of the Chinese Revolution, in the north wing, and the National Museum of China in the south wing. In 2003 the two museums merged to form the National Museum of China.

Auditoria and theater space or meeting and performance halls figure centrally in the history of cultural infrastructure facilities. Auditoria have provided party and government meeting space as well as performance space. At the intersection of party authority over culture and cultural infrastructure facilities, Lenin advanced the

nationalization of theaters and performance venues with “a censoring function by calling for an inspection of the repertoire by the authorities to make sure it was serving the socialist ideal” (Senelick & Ostrovsky, 2014, p. 17). Space for performances and party evaluation of them is important because the dramatic arts are meant to be didactic forms of entertainment. Lenin’s approach is found in Mao’s understanding of the role of theater in socialist society. “Central to (Mao’s) thinking was that literature and arts should be used for publicity in society and to educate people. The theater is, of course, the camp of the performing arts to educate people.” (Lu, 2019, p. 16).

The PRC’s own history of international friendship relations has also prioritized the construction of cultural infrastructure facilities. Just as the Soviet Union advised the PRC and marked the relationship with Soviet exhibition halls in major cities, the PRC’s foreign relations with Africa introduced projects for cultural infrastructure facilities. China has designed government assembly halls for Ghana, Guinea, and Sudan (Roskam, 2015; Ding, 2023). They mark the space of international exchange and show the result of direct aid provided by the PRC. China’s government design institutes have also provided designs for overseas international friendship buildings (Xue & Ding, 2018).

The importance of cultural infrastructure facilities in the development of socialism gained international notice. Even in 1951, a United States Office of Intelligence Research report, covering eight countries, identified the proliferation of “cultural facilities” in the communist bloc. It identifies how cultural facilities are “directly connected with the life of the laboring people,” serving as places of “mass participation...in all phases of cultural activity” (U.S. Department of State, 1951, p. 182). Mao’s platform made culture and education “national, scientific, and widespread” with the development of “press, radio, literature, art, drama, and cinema” that would promote “political consciousness” (U.S. Department of State, 1951, p. 159). The role of cultural facilities in housing and advancing socialism was apparent during the Cold War.

### 3. The urban aesthetics of socialist realism

At the crux of the material and social construction of culture, the philosophy of socialist realism has guided aesthetic standards. Socialist realism’s theoretical sphere treats culture and the arts in general as spheres of production for didactic works that shape social consciousness. Arriving in China with the “Learning from the Soviet Union” (向苏联学习) campaign, socialist realism “demanded all work in the creative arts be ‘socialist in content and national in form.’” (Fan, 2011, p. 96) Cultural infrastructure facilities, ever functional, would house and

present arts programs with dynamic socialist values. The function of socialist realism, as Dobrenko (2007, p. 4) reminds us, is to “*produce reality by aestheticizing it.*”

The aesthetics of socialist realism manifest in several forms, including spatiality, temporality, visuality, mass and weight, emotive affect, and general dynamism. The emotive aesthetic of socialist realism, not unlike the tenor of party discourse, is persistent positivity! The temporal aesthetic of socialist realism is speed and acceleration. Stalinist socialist production especially circulated through the idea and reality of increasing the speed of material production. Its well-known historic Stakhanovite version was heavy (industry) and fast (zealous labor) (Dobrenko, 2007). The rapid construction of the Ten Great Buildings, in the 1950s, was the outstanding national demonstration of these precepts. Similarly, the temporality of socialist realism orients toward the future.

Architecture figures centrally in socialist realism. Indeed, as Clark (2003, p. 4) states, “architecture, as spatial architectonics, could be seen as the quintessential genre of socialist realism.” Architectural design became “teamwork for socialist construction” (2003, p. 95). “Consequently,” Hu (2021, p. 105) writes, “architecture was seen and applied as a ruling instrument with the ideological representation and institutional control from the state and the Party.” Designs for architectural spaces of cultural infrastructure, both internal and external space, would undergo political scrutiny and evaluation to ensure they embodied characteristics conducive to advancing party-state goals and ideals.

Socialist realism in architectural space should symbolize a “higher-order space” that mediates between correct ideology and the people, who are to be renewed and inspired by exposure to and experience in cultural facilities. The architectural space of cultural facilities thus must be uplifting and dignified, inspiring yet controlled. It must be sufficiently sophisticated, striving for “political cohesion” that can enfold the intelligentsia and elites on the “ideological front” (Senelick & Ostrovsky, 2014, p. 350). The built environment of cultural facilities should represent the aesthetics of power and resonate with those who have it and aspire to it.

A high-profile cultural infrastructure facility in the PRC “is first and foremost a political project...governed by political motivations” (Lu, 2019, p. 16), rather than commercial factors. The spatial politics of cultural infrastructure are significant across multiple scales, from the interior exhibition or performance space to the design of the edifice and its site context. The national model for urban site context is arguably in Beijing, on Chang’an Avenue, the city’s east-west central artery, where

the contemporary cultural facility housing the National Center for the Performing Arts stands side by side with the Great Hall of the People, one of the Ten Great Buildings. Positioned as if regarding one other, these buildings exemplify the resonance and interplay between the cultural and political spheres. Their relational layout arguably “illustrates the close association of urban development and politics in China” (Sun, 2019, p. 99). This cityscape’s politics of aesthetics manifest in contemporary design for a new cultural facility that represents the internationalized vision of reform – opening to the world.

## 4. Cultural infrastructure facilities in the reform era

Old city or new city, the urban planning requirements of a contemporary Chinese city include construction of cultural infrastructure facilities. The number of cultural infrastructure facilities in a city, their size, prominence, and design significance, reflect the city’s level of government and budget (Guo *et al.*, 2004; Guo & Sun, 2006). In the early reform era, most cities constructed new cultural facilities in the 1980s, followed by new and larger versions, often on new sites in new locations, in the 1990s.

Consider the example of constructing cultural infrastructure facilities in Shenzhen. In 1980, Shenzhen emerged as a new prefecture-level city with a distinctive functional assignment, the first special economic zone. The popular narrative in reform history portrays Shenzhen as the first and most successful special economic zone, leading economic reform with the highest annual gross domestic product growth globally, in the mid-1980s, as if unshackled from socialist requirements (Cartier, 2018; 2020). However, this narrative about Shenzhen misreads the cultural facilities mandate.

In the early 1980s, Shenzhen had official instructions to allocate land and construct “eight cultural facilities” for a museum, library, theater, news center, television station, science museum, stadium, and university. Shenzhen officials, facing responsibility to jumpstart the reform economy, expressed concern at the time. The Shenzhen mayor said, “we would rather go hungry than build the eight cultural facilities” (Sun, 2019, p. 77). His counterpart at the Propaganda Department pointed out that investment for “cultural construction” in 1981 – 1983 accounted for one-third of total infrastructure finance in Shenzhen (Sun & Xue, 2020, p. 440). Even in the earliest years of reform and opening, the Shenzhen government prioritized the construction of cultural infrastructure facilities.

From one decade to the next, cities that built cultural facilities in the 1980s sought to update their cultural infrastructure, relatively modest in scale and design, with

entirely new buildings. The prominent cities of the 1990s, especially Guangzhou and Shenzhen, began planning monumental iconic cultural facilities at new locations. A clear approach emerged in the process, first developed by Shenzhen: The creation of a large-scale new city center on a tabula rasa site with an axial plan dominated by government buildings and cultural infrastructure facilities. Such plans, often on a north-south axis, evoke the formal layout of Chinese imperial cities (Cartier, 2002) and the blank slate approach of the experimental socialist city.

In addition to Shenzhen, other cities in the Pearl River Delta embarked on the construction of these new city center projects. The planning discourse in China commonly refers to them as “CBDs” or central business districts and the term has circulated widely in the literature on Chinese cities. By the early 2000s, over 35 cities had proposed new CBDs (Li, 2019). However, at their cores, these new city centers demonstrate little, if any, commercial development. The core of a new city center is a large rectangular open space or plaza, headed by a new government building and flanked by multiple cultural infrastructure facilities. The overall plan and built environment – the form and function – reproduce a contemporary version of the socialist model urban landscape.

### 4.1. New city centers and cultural infrastructure facilities in cities of the Pearl River Delta

Cities in the Pearl River Delta region were pioneers in constructing new city center projects featuring distinctive cultural infrastructure facilities. Through international architectural competitions, Guangzhou and Shenzhen envisioned iconic monumental buildings for their new cultural facilities. However, the path of development was far from straightforward. An analysis of the prolonged planning process of Zhujiang New Town, also known as Pearl River New Town, a new city center or “CBD” development in Guangzhou’s Tianhe district, recalls the challenges.

The Zhujiang New Town project was initially planned for development in the 1990s but conflicting priorities hindered progress (Tian & Shen, 2011). The project prioritized high-rise office space, as Li (2019) explains, but new commercial buildings in other districts were already becoming established. By the end of the 1990s, “the developed area mostly consisted of high-end apartments, the costs of which were easily recovered by real estate developers. Not a single business office building was opened and Guangzhou’s CBD had, quite unexpectedly, been hijacked into a high-end residential area” (Li, 2019, p. 279). In addition, the resumption of agricultural land on the eastern flank of the project, including land in

Liede Village, one of the most studied cases in China, required extensive negotiation with the city (Wu, 2022). With concerns about impacts of the Asian Financial Crisis and seeing competition from cities in the region, especially Shenzhen, the Guangzhou leadership renewed commitment to the construction of Zhujiang New Town.

In 2002, after a comprehensive review of pertinent issues, city leaders redoubled efforts to complete the development of the new city center in Tianhe in relation to the policy principle of promoting Guangzhou's profile as a leading international city. The deputy party secretary and mayor at the time, Lin Shusen, who had been a past chair of the Guangdong Province Planning Committee, announced that future infrastructure construction would be "considered based on standards of advanced world cities" (世界先进城市的标准来考虑) (Guangzhou's infrastructure construction aims at world-class, 2002). In 2003, Lin was appointed as the party secretary of Guangzhou, a position he held until mid-2006. Under Lin's leadership, Guangzhou prioritized the development of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century built environment.

Provinces and cities generally formulate multiple-year plans within the framework of the national 5-year plan. During Secretary Lin's tenure, the government of Guangzhou prepared a city-wide cultural facilities plan for the period 2003 – 2007, spanning the 10<sup>th</sup> (2001 – 05) and 11<sup>th</sup> (2006 – 11) 5-year plans. In 2004, the city government published the "Opinions on Accelerating the Construction of Cultural Infrastructure Facilities in Guangzhou" (关于加快广州文化基础设施建设的意见) along with the Guangzhou Cultural Infrastructure Construction Projects Plan, 2003 – 07, coinciding with Lin's appointment as party secretary. It emphasized the need "to accelerate the realization of the municipal party committee's goal of constructing "cultural Guangzhou"" (加快实现市委提出的建设“文化广州”的目标) (Government of Guangzhou, 2004). The policy program aimed to accelerate the construction of cultural infrastructure facilities, with a completion deadline set for 2010, timed with Guangzhou's hosting of the 2010 Asian Games (Shin, 2014). In that temporal context, facing a national deadline and the imperative to "accelerate," party and government officials mobilized support.

The Guangzhou Cultural Infrastructure Construction Projects Plan, 2003 – 07, outlines nine priority facilities projects, 10 general facilities projects, and six projects in preparation (Table 1). It lists projects by rank in the administrative hierarchy, sources of funding, and responsible bureaucracies. Four projects would be funded by the province: Guangdong Province Science Center, New Guangdong Province Museum, Sun Yat-sen Library

**Table 1. Projects under the Guangzhou Cultural Infrastructure Construction Projects Plan (2003 – 07)**

Priority projects
Provincial government-funded projects
Guangdong Province Science Center
New Guangdong Province Museum
Sun Yat-sen Library Expansion Project
Guangdong Province Cantonese Opera Center
City government-funded projects
Guangzhou Library New Building
Guangzhou Grand Theater
New Radio and Television Center
Guangzhou Daily Culture Square
Guangzhou University Town Book Center
General projects
Guangzhou Acrobatic Troupe Comprehensive Teaching Building
Huangpu Military Academy Historical Site renewal and maintenance
Memorial Hall of the CCP Third General Assembly Historical Site
Guangzhou Fine Arts Academy and Sculpture Institute New Site
Peking Opera Theater
Guangzhou Museum integration project
Mazhan Confucian College Clusters restoration project
Guangzhou Ballet Troupe Rehearsal and Audition Hall
Guangzhou City Book Logistics Center
Nanhai Temple Maritime Museum
Projects in preparation
Guangzhou City Archives Phase I
Ancient Nan-Yue Kingdom Museum expansion and renewal
Ancient Nan-Yue Kingdom Palace Museum
Guangzhou Acrobatic Arts Center
Memorial Hall of the 1911 Xinhai Revolution
Guangzhou Film and Television Production Center
Guangzhou Daily Tower

Source: Excerpted from Government of Guangzhou (2004).

Expansion Project, and Guangdong Province Cantonese Opera Center. Five projects would be funded by the city government: Guangzhou Library New Building, Guangzhou Grand Theater (also known as the Guangzhou Opera House), New Radio and Television Center, *Guangzhou Daily* Culture Square, and the Guangzhou University Town Book Center. Ten general projects would be developed by the city's Culture Bureau. Altogether, the more than 20 projects in the Guangzhou Cultural Infrastructure Facilities Construction Projects Plan, 2003 – 07, render the iconic buildings on the Zhujiang New Town axis only a fraction of the city's cultural infrastructure facilities work.

A city's cultural infrastructure facilities include buildings that hold exhibitions and performances and provide leisure services to the public, and cultural facilities without direct public functions and access which include news and media organizations under the Publicity Department (renamed from the Propaganda Department in 2008). Among the four priority projects at the provincial level in the Guangzhou plan, the second in the list after the Science Museum is the New Guangdong Province Museum. On a prime site, two superblocks west of Liede Village, the New Guangdong Province Museum would be constructed at the southeast corner of the Tianhe new city axis. Among five city-level projects, the top three – Guangzhou New Library Building, Guangzhou Grand Theater, and New Radio and Television Center – would be built on the west side of the Tianhe Zhujiang axis, with the radio and television center across the river on the south bank. The Guangzhou Grand Theater would become the city government's anchor project, at the southwest corner of the axis facing the New Guangdong Province Museum.

Guangzhou held international design competitions for the cultural facilities that would be constructed in the new city center project. The Guangzhou Urban Planning Bureau organized competitions for the New Guangdong Province Museum, Guangzhou Grand Theater, and Guangzhou Library New Building. The Ministry of Education separately developed the Guangzhou Children's Palace, another infrastructure facility with Soviet origins (Swartz, 1989). The design for the grand theater, awarded to Zaha Hadid Architects, broke ground in 2005 and opened in May 2010 on schedule. However, the time pressure led to compromising the building exterior, "an illustration of the predicament of architectural practice when profoundly constrained by politics" (Ding, 2019, p. 66). Driven by a political deadline, the requirement for speed prevailed. Nikken Sekkei won the design for the Guangzhou Library New Building. The Guangzhou No. 2 Children's Palace, designed by Steffian Bradley Architects, a now-defunct Boston firm, opened in 2007.

The success of the new city center arguably hinged on the completion of the New Guangdong Province Museum. Like the hierarchy of the governing system, cultural facilities also represent the rank of the city or governing body that is responsible for their development and administration. The highest-ranking facilities tend to occupy prominent sites. The province's new museum was arguably the number one project in the Zhujiang New Town plan, slated for the southeast corner of the new city center. It would become the leading leisure destination in Tianhe for local, domestic, and international visitors. The existing Guangdong Province Museum building, at a historic site in

Yuexiu district on the other side of the city, was necessarily important, yet the building had a tired façade much the same as untold numbers of late-20<sup>th</sup>-century cultural infrastructure facilities in China: Granite slab, white tile, blue-tinted glass, ungainly pillars (Figure 1).

In 2004, the selection committee for the New Guangdong Province Museum competition awarded the project to the Hong Kong firm Rocco Design Architects, a Hong Kong firm led by architect Rocco Yim, for their "treasure box" concept, a contemporary interpretation of the Chinese collectanea box. Serving as a cabinet for precious objects, the treasure box or *duobaoge* (多宝格) is an object of aesthetic distinction designed to hold the owner's collection of precious miniatures. Popular among elites in the imperial era, *duobaoge* vary in design and material, often finished in lacquer, cinnabar, or stone, and are distinguished by uniquely layered and positioned compartments. The collectanea box is a material metaphor for a museum. The Rocco Design conceptualization for the New Guangdong Province Museum is the miniature curio cabinet blown up, *objet d'art* on a monumental scale (Rocco Design Architects, n.d.).

The New Guangdong Province Museum, also opened in 2010, has won multiple awards, including the Hong Kong Institute of Architects Medal of the Year 2009, the Chicago Athenaeum International Architecture Award 2014, and the German Design Council's Iconic Award 2014. Unlike many iconic buildings whose signature architect conveys significance, the New Guangdong Provincial Museum "catapulted Rocco [Yim] into the international spotlight at the highest level" (Cook, 2013, p. 15). The massive block of the building appears to float above its raised site, forming a dramatic entryway for visitors on the ground. Among notable features, the roof continues the design of the exterior walls, to be seen from above and from the viewing platform of Canton Tower across the river (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Guangdong Province Museum, ca. 1992. 215 Wenming Road, Guangzhou. Source: Wikimedia Commons



Since then, Yim's architecture has become a subject of international interest. Critics find impressive his handling of space and the confidence of his designs. The idea that the "power" of Yim's architecture "emanates from the assurance and sheer scale at which it operates" (Cook, 2013, p. 15) resonates with large-scale state space in China and the authority to govern it. Debate over the origins of his work is more speculative. The "lucid planning and formal energy" of his designs seem to share elements with the "rationalism of N.A. Ladovsky and the avant-garde discourse of the Soviet Vkhutemas" (Frampton, 2013, p. 11), the influential design school of the 1920s, in Moscow, that emphasized interpreting space through angular yet sculptural models. Praise for the "bold, lucid, masculine forms" (Maki, 2013, p. 9) of Yim's designs for museum buildings appears in the architectural literature.

In 2006, the Organization Department appointed Secretary Lin to the leadership of Guizhou province, first as deputy party secretary and then, in 2007, as party secretary and governor. Accounts of his achievements in Guangzhou appear widely in the media. In 2011, in Beijing, on the sidelines of his next post, vice chairman of the Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and Overseas Chinese Subcommittee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, reporters asked him to reflect on the history of decisions about major construction projects. Lin recalled a time when the idea to build Guangzhou as an "international metropolis was ridiculed by many people" (建国际大都市遭到很多人耻笑) (Liu *et al*, 2011). Lin's leadership era is remembered for constructing Guangzhou's road network, subway lines, port facilities, and new airport (Xu & Yeh, 2005), in addition to realizing the new city center project in the Tianhe district.

## 4.2. New city centers in Shenzhen, Shunde, and Dongguan

In the mid-1990s, Shenzhen focused on planning a new city center project in Futian district dominated by an administrative building and multiple cultural infrastructure facilities. This initiative marked the second wave of cultural infrastructure facilities construction in Shenzhen. In the 1980s, Shenzhen constructed five of its first eight cultural infrastructure facilities along Shennan Road, the main east-west artery. For the Futian new city center, laid out on a north-south axis, crossing Shennan Road, Shenzhen held architectural design competitions earlier than Guangzhou. As Sun and Xue (2020, p. 443) note, "the Futian Central District competition became the first international competition for a CBD." Lee-Timchula Architects won the design competition for the Futian government administrative Center, known as the Citizens' Center. The building's contemporary flying roof, punctured

by elemental forms in symbolic imperial colors, dominates the view at the top of the axis (Figure 3).

On Lianhua Mountain, the only major statue of Deng Xiaoping in China faces the view straight down the center line. On the western side, just south of and adjacent to the Citizens' Center, the new Shenzhen Concert Hall and Library, designed by Arata Isozaki, opened in 2007. Underground, the CBD Book Mall, designed by Kisho Kurokawa, opened in 2006. The Children's Palace, on the eastern side, opened in 2004. The Futian new city center, first and distinctive, consequently influenced other cities, including Guangzhou (Sun & Xue, 2020). A main element of the layout places cultural buildings adjacent and subsidiary to the dominant government building, establishing relational space between the party-state and cultural functions.

Dongguan and Shunde also developed new city center projects dominated by cultural infrastructure facilities



Figure 2. New Guangdong Province Museum, Zhuzi New Town. Rocco Design Architects, 2011. Source: Photo by the author



Figure 3. The center of the Shenzhen Citizen's Center at Futian frames Lianhua Mountain to the north, 2004. Source: Photo by the author

before Guangzhou. Both are historic counties of the Pearl River Delta region, but they have different histories in the system of administrative divisions. In 1988, the central government elevated Dongguan to a city at the prefecture level, an uncommon reclassification that facilitated rapid development. This change in administrative status entrains the formal process of land leasing and real estate development, with the elevated city status allowing for larger-scale land use transformations. Amidst over-extended economic activity, in the early 2000s, Dongguan developed such a large new city center that it became notorious as a “gargantuan” plaza on an “inhuman” scale (Oakes, 2020, p. 110-11). The massive site demonstrates the aesthetic of “building big with no regret,” Zhu’s (2011) characterization of the continuity of socialist realism in the reform era. Another tabula rasa for state construction, the plaza fronts a new administrative center with adjacent cultural facilities, an exhibition hall, a library, a convention center, and a theater (Figure 4).

A mural inside the Dongguan Exhibition Hall portrays the new city center in the socialist style of spirited positivity. It shows the relationship between the leading government building, at the head or superior position on the axis, and cultural infrastructure buildings. The text on the mural, in Chinese and English, refers to the open space as the “central plaza” and describes the relationship between politics and culture as “integrating functions of administrative office and cultural leisure.” (Figure 5) The layout symbolizes the dominance of state space and its power to place culture, relationally and supportively, on its flanks.

After Deng Xiaoping signaled the deepening of reform in 1992, the central government declared another batch of counties as county-level cities. Shunde was one of them. A decade later, in 2002, Shunde became a district of Foshan, the prefecture-level city on Guangzhou’s western border. Counties reclassified as districts normally lose their budgetary and planning authority. However, Shunde, on the strength of its economy and reform leadership, became a district in direct governing relations with Guangzhou (Chan, 2019). This condition informs why Shunde developed a new center called a cultural center rather than a new city center. Designed on an axial landscape in front of the new district government administrative building, the Shunde Cultural Center features a library, a performing arts center, and two museums (Figures 6 and 7).

The firm P&T Architects and Engineers, originally Palmer and Turner, architects for the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank buildings, built in Hong Kong and Shanghai in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, designed the cultural facilities for Shunde. They won the American Institute of Architects and American Library Association (ALA) 2007



Figure 4. Dongguan City Central Plaza, 2005. Exhibition Hall on the left and Administrative Center on the right. Source: Photo by the author



Figure 5. “Central plaza of Dongguan city,” Dongguan Exhibition Hall, interior mural, 2005. The text on the mural reads, “The central plaza of Dongguan city is of magnificent style and elegant environment, integrating functions of administrative office and cultural leisure.” Source: Photo by the author



Figure 6. Shunde Library, Shunde District Cultural Center, 2005. Source: Photo by the author

Library Building Award for “a global architecture that... maintains a compelling sense of place...and execution that equals the best of international architecture” (ALA, 2007). Shunde developed a pragmatic plan “without any site context” based on “minimalist design...and tight budget” (P&T Group, 2008, p. 235) – sending a message about responsible development to the oversized city center project on the other side of the delta. A plaque on the exterior of the Shunde performing arts center records the four *danwei* construction institutes involved in developing and constructing the building. They demonstrate three levels of state participation above Shunde, namely, Foshan City, Guangzhou as the provincial capital, and the national or central state construction and engineering bureau (Figure 8). Such firms, contemporary legacies of the historic state design



Figure 7. Shunde Library left and Shunde Performing Arts Center, 2005. Source: Photo by the author



Figure 8. Shunde Performing Arts Center construction and design *danwei*, plaque mounted on exterior façade, 2005. Source: Photo by the author

institutes, plan, engineer, and construct architectural projects in contemporary China.

## 5. Conclusion

If the rectilinear plan on a north-south axis reproduces the layout of the classical Chinese city, with its assured symbolism of millennial power, the new city center confidently overlays it with monumental state space, symbolizing the socialist *tabula rasa* with utopian elements that places at its core iconic cultural infrastructure facilities in which to house and display party-approved information and events. The continuity of cultural infrastructure facilities in the reform era, after 1978, demonstrates the PRC’s enduring commitment to socialist construction and the construction of space for party-led articulation and production of cultural knowledge.

A historical approach to cultural infrastructure facilities, re-establishing the exchange between the PRC and the Soviet Union and its basis in socialist general planning, allows us to discern the continuity of state cultural infrastructure facilities in contemporary built environments of new city center projects. Dominated by monumental government buildings and edifices dedicated to state-defined culture and history, at their cores, these centers symbolizes the relationship between politics and culture and its correct trajectory. Not business districts, not CBDs, new city center cores are party-state cultural-political precincts, reproducing contemporary versions of socialist urbanism. In these formal landscapes of new cultural infrastructure facilities, commercial activity is nowhere on view.

In reform-era China, iconic edifices of cultural infrastructure facilities affiliate with the appearances of international design and global capitalism – they stand up to the appearances of iconic buildings in other world cities. Yet they reproduce the meanings and functions of socialist urbanism, ever-updated for the transformational future. The socialist *aesthetic* of reform and opening is economic and international. Perhaps more than any other city, Shenzhen symbolizes this reality. Shenzhen, city without history – outstanding *tabula rasa* – simultaneously led market reform and new construction of cultural infrastructure facilities, reproducing relational space of political power and its oversight of cultural functions.

Raising a contemporary international profile through urban construction and competing with rapidly transforming younger cities in its regional backyard, Guangzhou commissioned for cultural facilities architectural firms from London, Boston, Tokyo, and

Hong Kong. The cultural facilities on the Zhujiang New Town axis symbolize the reform era's bold opening to the world. They adapt globalizing design aesthetics, while their formal layout and functions continue principles of socialist urbanism for the new experimental city, in which a new city center represents renewed urban ideals.

The core landscapes of new city centers represent and reproduce many of the forms and processes of socialist urbanism. Blank-slate development sites, state design and construction firms, superblocks, acceleration and speed, aesthetics of optimism, and futuristic designs, all continue to characterize the process of realizing the built environment of the new city in China. Cultural facilities are state-built and state-building infrastructures, part of the material reality of the PRC's enduring commitment to constructing futures. Economic reform did not witness the end of cultural infrastructure facilities, just as cultural facilities have changed in architectural form but not function in the PRC.

Socialism changes with the dynamics and priorities of communist parties, replete with evolving contradictions that challenge any complete definition of socialist urbanism. As Kotkin observes, what was named Stalinism in the world at large was socialism inside the Soviet Union. The PRC has maintained a dedication to socialism while it is common to nominalize urbanism based on historical periods. The reform era generated new economic regimes of urban development, yet the role of the state in the cultural and information spheres, represented by the culture and propaganda bureaucracies, did not dissolve under reform and has arguably expanded. Party committees have continued to deliberate and select architectural designs, both domestic and international, for important new cultural infrastructure buildings. Reading the new urban landscapes that they distinguish also depends on seeing like the party-state, unobscured by and disentangled from discourses of capitalist spectacle that identify and reproduce iconicity without history.

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## Further disclosure

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