The Layout of Ancient Chinese Capital Sites and How They Shed Light on Changes in Society

Liu Qingzhu

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The “capital city” is a product of history; it is the architecture of a specific form of society in the course of history. “Capitals” evolve from “cities” and “cities” evolve from prehistoric settlements.

As indicated by the archaeological finds from the Neolithic period, with the advancement of agriculture, stabilization of settled life and population increase, settlement sites emerged and continued to develop rapidly during the mid-Neolithic period. The prehistoric settlement is a form of social organization based on blood ties.

During the late phase of the Neolithic period, in tandem with the economic expansion of society an association of settlements based on geographical ties may have emerged. The “city” is probably a social platform responsible for managing this kind of “association of settlements.” It does not belong to any particular settlement as it overrides the settlement as a form of society. In essence, it is a way of negating the traditional society of settlements based on blood ties.

Supposedly prehistoric city sites have two fundamental characteristics. First, the “city” must have a “city wall” or “wall.” If that is the case, does that mean that any type of architectural site enclosed by a “city wall” or “wall” is a “city”? I do not believe that one should draw such a conclusion. Second, the content of the architecture within the “city” is mainly constituted by large-scale earthen foundations for the likes of palaces and temples. The “city” is the material medium of a new form of society that has evolved from prehistoric settlements. It is the administrative center of a society of multiple “settlements” (not multiple “settlements” linked together solely on the basis of blood ties, but multiple “settlements” from different blood lines). It is the center for coordinating benefits; it is the political outcome of social progress and economic growth. The rise and formation of the ancient Chinese “city” is not the inevitable outcome of the division of subsistence (such as the division of agriculture versus handicraft, or the division of agriculture versus trade), and it is not the result of the “polarization of city versus countryside” (the polarization of “city” versus “countryside” is a specific phenomenon of a specific phase in history). It is produced by the progression of human society from a form based on blood ties to one based on geographical ties.

With the formation of “confederated states” during the late Neolithic period, the “city” that functions as the political center also emerges. By this time, society already has three levels of organization: “settlement,” “town,” and “capital.” Both “town” and “capital” are “cities” corresponding to “confederacy” and “state” respectively. They probably represent a form of society with two levels of organization during the “pre-monarchy period.”

The progression from “city” to “capital” is parallel to the progression from “confederated state” to “monarchy state.” In sum, it can be said that this corresponds to the course of history in the formation of ancient civilization and the rise of the nation state.

The capital emerges in tandem with the monarchy state. The monarchy’s capital site differs from the prehistoric city site in that the monarchy’s capital has a central district of palaces and temples enclosed by earthen ramparts forming a palace city generally with a rectangular or square layout. The principal palaces and temples within the palace city usually have rectangular layouts; a few have square layouts. The palace city is often enclosed by an outer city (also called the Big City). Excavated prehistoric sites also show an abundance of domestic architectural ruins; no such architecture exists inside the palace city of the monarchy’s capital.

Archaeological data and textual records remind us that capitals during the monarchy period are not only markedly different from “cities” during the “confederated
states” period, but there is also a difference in the hierarchical ranking of “cities” as political centers of different regions. If one can say that there is a two-tier “city structure” during the “confederated states” period, one can also say that there is a triple-tier “city structure” during the “monarchy state” period. According to this triple-tier city structure, architecture reflects the different magnitudes of “cities” according to their rankings. This includes the size, height, quantity, etc. of buildings, all of which increase or decrease in proportion to the ranking of the city. The design of cities by hierarchical ranking as described above has not been fully attested by the archaeology of city sites from the pre-Qin period. Nonetheless, on the basis of archaeological materials on hand and related textual records, we can see the varying sizes of cities from the pre-Qin period. This phenomenon is brought about by the existence of a form of society under the monarchy state in which a triple-tier system of social organization forms a triple-tier center of government. And this form of triple-tier society with the king, the prince and the lords and ministers respectively is reflected in the capital of the monarchy, the capital of the princely state, and the city of lords and ministers.

The Qin and Han monarchies are unified empires in which power is centralized. Throughout the country there are many cities of different sizes in different regions. Apart from Xianyang 咸阳, capital of the Qin Dynasty, Chang’an 长安 and Luoyang 洛阳, capitals of the Han Dynasty, there are “cities” of different sizes and rankings determined according to the hierarchical system of provincial administration. They function as the administrative seat of the province, of the municipality and of the village in descending order. In fact, these “cities” reflect the political framework of provincial and municipal administration under the Qin and Han empires. In post-Han times through the Ming and Qing periods, the ideas behind the planning of ancient Chinese cities continued to be restricted by this rigid, hierarchical political system.

In prehistoric city sites, the main format of the city site is the “single city format.” This “single city format” of prehistoric city sites (that is, a city site as “one single unit” as mentioned above) is the historical product that accompanies the rise of “regional states” and “confederated states” of the late Neolithic period. This kind of “city” is in fact the earliest form of the “palace city.” One can say that the “city” first appears in the form of the “palace city.”

The prehistoric city site (i.e., the “early city”) as a “single city format” is basically a “palace city” in form and function. This city continues to evolve as regional states and confederated states undergo territorial expansion, population increase and economic development. Regional states and confederated states merge and then become further annexed into the “monarchy state.” In response to the expanding administrative apparatus of the monarchy, there is an increasing demand for staff to provide for and to attend to the daily life of the ruling class. The “city” that only functions “to protect the lord” could no longer satisfy the needs of the capital; accordingly outside the “city” the “outer city” is built. This outer city is to “house its people” and the “people” are those that “serve” the ruling royal house. They are not producers of handicraft for trade, nor are they self-sufficient farmers. The outer city is not the direct result of economic growth. The outer city comes into being in response to the “political” development of the palace city as the political center.

The capital evolves from a “double city format” to a “triple city format.” This reflects how changes in the morphology of the society of the state are reflected in the layout and format of the city as the political center of the state.

During the Qin-Han period, the state’s society has developed from the form of government of a monarchy in the pre-Qin period to the form of government of an empire. Still, cities at that time basically retain the “double city format” of the monarchy period. The explanation for that is that city architecture as a type of material culture follows a different path of evolution even though it is still influenced and guided by politics. Generally speaking, in contrast to political changes, material culture is more conservative. It is due to this conservative nature of the layout and format of capital cities, in contrast to the development of forms of government and social structures, that it is only in the Northern Wei Luoyang City that the “triple city format” of the capital comes into being, even though the society under imperial rule has already been established since Qin-Han times. Under the Qin-Han empires central government buildings form monumental complexes, yet they do not constitute a unified district. It is only in the Northern Wei Luoyang City that, outside the palace city, government buildings congregating along both sides of the east-west central axis of the inner city constitute a relatively centralized architectural complex for the central government. The Sui Daxing 大兴—Tang Chang’an City reflected a further step in the development of an architectural complex dedicated to the central government—
the imperial city. Once the “triple city format” emerges in the Northern Wei Luoyang city as the capital’s format, it becomes the norm to be followed by capitals in subsequent dynasties of feudal monarchies. It shares the fate of ancient Chinese feudal society.

The capital with a “triple city format” exemplifies how a society under imperial rule differs from one under a monarchy. As the control and administration of a feudal empire with centralized power is executed through the apparatus of the central government, the inner city becomes the political platform for the control and administration of the state; the palace city in which the ruling house is located then becomes the political hub of the “head of state.” Meanwhile the outer city serves as a space in which the various functions of the capital are coordinated: as the political center for the state, the center for economic administration, the center for military command, the center for the regular operation of cultural and ritual activities for officials and the masses and for “services” (miscellaneous work related to the regular operation of “services” of the capital). The capital with a “triple city format” is in alignment with the society of a feudal empire with centralized power.

The palace is the platform of political activities for the state; it is the core architecture of the capital.

The ancestral temple of the capital is the outcome of the development and eventual merging of “blood ties politics” and “geopolitics.” Both ancestral temple and palace are the materialization of the “duality politics” of the ancient Chinese state. From archaeological discoveries of ancestral temple sites of capitals, one can see that the ancestral temples and palace halls of the Xia and Shang periods all have rectangular layouts. This is an indication of the period of “equality” of palace and ancestral temple. This is also the characteristic of the form of society during the early monarchy period, when “geopolitics” and “blood ties politics” run parallel to each other. From the late Western Zhou to Qin-Han times, the main hall of the ancestral temple of the capital changes from a rectangular to a semi-square or square layout while the main hall of the palace still has a rectangular layout. This change in layout of palace and ancestral temple halls reflect the rise and fall of “geopolitics” and “blood ties politics.” Towards the end of this period, that is, during the Western Han period, the main buildings of ritual architecture such as the ancestral temple of the capital, the mingtang 明堂 (bright hall), piyong 畋雍 (moat), lingtai 灵台 (spirit altar), sheji 社稷 (earth altar), etc. all have a square layout, and that is also true of the layout of the mausoleum complex and imperial tombs of the emperor and empress. In terms of architectural format, it seems that the ancestral temple is already “equal” to the rest of the ritual architecture of the royal house and the mausoleum architecture of the emperor and empress. The “equality between palace and temple” is gone. The declining status of the ancestral temple of the capital during the Western Han period reveals that in the society of the early imperial period, “geopolitics” have become stronger while “blood ties politics” have become weaker. After the Han dynasty, history seems to “turn around” when the main hall of the ancestral temple of the capital “reverts back” to a rectangular layout. This is not the revival of “blood ties politics;” instead this indicates that the ancestral temple is following “fashion” and that the status of the ancestral temple has declined even further; the ancestral temple has become the appendage of royal power. This is the characteristic of society during the mature phase of the imperial age.

According to historical records, during the monarchy period the palatial construction of the capital “prioritizes the ancestral temple.” This indicates that people at that time pay much attention to the ancestral temple. The “formation of civilization,” the emergence of the nation state, all reflect the rise and fall of “blood ties politics” and “geopolitics.” As the platform for the political activities of the ruler of the state, as the materialization of “geopolitics,” palatial architecture has become at least “equal in every way” to ancestral temple architecture, the material medium of “blood ties politics.”

The Qin-Han period is a time of departure from the monarchy state of the pre-Qin period to the entrance into the imperial age. The main difference between monarchy politics and imperial politics is the further development from blood ties politics to geopolitics. The most striking phenomenon in the architecture of the capital is the declining status of the ancestral temple. This is mainly indicated by the further change in format and in the shifting position of palatial architecture in the capital. According to the architectural format, it can be seen that the ancestral temple has become basically the same or nearly the same as other ritual architecture (including the mingtang 明堂 or biyong 畋雍, lingtai 灵台, sheji 社稷, etc.). The layout and positioning of palace and temple have undergone a major change. Under the Qin state or Qin monarchy, the ancestral temple in the capital district is not inside the Qin Xianyang City, and of course, not inside the Xianyang Palace. Rather, it is located outside the capital, along the south shore of the Wei River 河. During the early Western Han, Han Gaozu’s “high hall” and Han Emperor Hui’s temple are
both inside the Han Chang’an City. They are located outside the palace city, in the southeastern section of the Weiyang Palace and southwestern section of the Changle Palace respectively. During the late Western Han period, the ancestral temple and other ritual architecture of the capital are mostly situated in the southern suburb of the Han Chang’an City. During the pre-Qin period, the ancestral temple and palace are placed in the east and west respectively, inside the palatial architectural zone or inside the palace city. During the Qin and Han periods, the ancestral temple has been moved from inside the palace city of the capital to the outside (it was during the inaugural year of the Western Han that it was first moved outside the palace city). The main hall of the great dynasty has become the center of the capital. The change in the architecture of utmost importance inside the palace city—the altered position of the ancestral temple—is a significant reflection of the strengthening of geopolitics and weakening of blood ties politics under the unified and centralized power structure of the empire. Significantly, this exemplifies how changes in society are reflected in changes in the design and conceptualization of the capital’s architecture. It seems to be a natural state of affairs to “over-react.”

In ancient Chinese history, as the monarchy evolves towards the empire, blood ties politics that once played a critical role in facilitating politics in the monarchy state has been ousted by geopolitics. From the two being treated as “equal in every way” they are now being strictly differentiated as “major versus minor,” from a “parallel placement of palace and temple” in the center of the palace city or palatial district, it is changed to a placement of the palace (main hall of the great dynasty) at the center of the palace city or capital while the ancestral temple is located outside the capital. During the early period when the empire sues the monarchy, the layout and placement of palace and temple precisely reflect the pattern of political development as described above.

After the Qin and Han periods, Emperor Ming of the Wei constructed the ancestral temple near Tongtuo Avenue in Luoyang. The ancestor temple of Luoyang of the Western Jin and Northern Wei, that of Ye of Shi Hu, King of Zhao of the Sixteen Kingdoms, and that of Ye of the Eastern Wei and Northern Qi are all placed inside the capital but outside the palace city. It must be emphasized that the ancestor temple of the Northern Wei Luoyang City is placed inside the inner city (or royal city) of the capital but outside the palace city. This way of positioning the ancestor temple has an enduring impact on subsequent dynasties. The ancestor temple’s location in the capital is different in Nanjing under the Six Dynasties; the location in the southern suburb of the capital may have been influenced by the ritual architecture in the southern suburb of Han Chang’an.

Geopolitics plays an increasingly important role in the government of the imperial state in ancient China in which power is centralized. Only the great dynastic hall of the capital occupies the “center,” “the front” and “the apex,” it alone possesses the status and position to function as the axle or central axis of the palace city and capital. This fully manifests the form of a society under a unified and centralized feudal empire in which imperial power is ultimate and the emperor is unsurpassed. Still, the ultimate ruler of a feudal society must rely on “blood ties politics” in order to inherit and secure his position as the supreme ruler of the state. It is through the “ancestor temple” that “blood ties politics” can be used to garner political legitimacy. Nevertheless, during the imperial age the ancestor temple has been relocated from the central architectural zone of the palace city inside the pre-Qin capital to outside the capital. This clearly signifies the decline of “blood ties politics” as the new society of the imperial age develops and expands.

Reference Works


Note: The original paper, published in Kaogu Xuebao 考古学报 (Acta Archaeologica Sinica) 2006.3: 281–312, is written by Liu Qingzhu 刘庆柱. This summary is prepared by the author himself and English-translated by Judy Chungwa Ho.