Cityscape of the Ordinary in Tang period Chang’an

Spanning an area of 84 square kilometre, Tang period Chang’an was a large city even by today’s standard. The city laid out on a gridiron plan with palaces, two big markets and 108 walled residential wards. It had six major avenues, each about 120 metres wide. While not much had been written about such general structures of the Chang’an city, its designing principles are still under debates and the internal structures of its residential wards are largely unknown. In this talk, Professor Heng Chye Kiang from the Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore, presents his argument on the Chang’an city’s designing principles as well as his methodology to reconstruct the cityscape within the residential wards.

Coming from the urban planning perspective which conceptualises city planning in a systematic manner, Prof Heng observes that the design of Tang period Chang’an was a combination of two traditions of capital planning in Chinese history. The first emphasises that capital cities should be a square measuring nine Chinese miles (li) and three gates on each side. Within the city were nine longitudinal and nine latitudinal streets. The second tradition belongs to the cities of northern China tribes, which tended to locate their palaces in the northern side of their cities. Prof Heng hence proposes that Yuwen Kai, designer of the Chang’an city, could have combined these two traditions as a symbol of unification of China.

Most of the daily activities probably took place within the residential wards or markets, given the strict curfew system that restricted the residents’ time to venture beyond their wards. A ward in Tang period Chang’an was a residential area similar to a small township/village. The residential wards came in different sizes. Walls separated the wards and most had four gates each. On average, there were 2,300 households per square kilometre, or 11,500 persons per square kilometre. Wards closer to the markets probably had a higher density of households.

Unfortunately, there is no historical record of the sizes of houses within the wards, and this hindered the reconstruction of the residential wards. There is, however, a recount by the Chinese poet Bai Juyi, who was then a government official of the fifth rank in the Luoyang city. According to Bai, he was living in a 17-mu compound, of which 12 mu were used for gardens and five mu for residential purpose. Prof Heng also finds that officials of third rank and above could have compound gates that open directly to the major avenues. Their houses were likely to be situated along the southern wall of the wards. Other lower rank officials might have compounds near the ward gates for convenience in travel.

Combining these findings with other historical descriptions of prominent residences and wards, archaeological discoveries of architectural remains, pictorial representations of contemporary dwellings and so on, Prof Heng has worked on a theoretical reconstruction. Using digital media, he is able to produce the graphical representations of Chang’an residential wards of different spatial quality and population density. Although conjectural, the digital reconstruction provides a visual understanding of the general urban tissue of much of Tang Chang’an and the cityscape of ordinary folks.

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