

Session 2. East Asian Society and Future City

Zhuangzi Philosophy and Urban Civilization in East Asia

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Urban civilization is in transition. As climate change resulting from fossil fuel use is expected to have a catastrophic impact on human life in the near future, the meaning of visionary projects from the past fades away. New insights are needed for current urban civilization. Facing this unprecedented situation, many urban designers and experts are making enormous efforts to address environmental issues, suggesting a variety of theories and practices, which are widely applied to architectural and urban projects.

However, despite of their efforts, urban environment is getting worse without showing any positive signs. Moreover, sustainable urban models which architects and planners have developed with affordable wisdoms, like Masdar City in Abu Dhabi and Eco-city in Tianjin, seem not successful. Currently, China is constructing more than 200 eco-cities, which, however, are not making effective contributions to improving degraded urban environment. Terms like 'ecological' or 'eco-friendly' are being named as mere brand new rhetoric. Environmental concerns are used in construction business level. Considering this situation, it is clear that environmental problems in large cities cannot be solved in technical and methodological level, but should be associated with more comprehensive world view. Thus, a fundamental introspection is needed for that.

Here is the more reason why this essay approaches to urban civilization in East Asia through Zhuangzi philosophy. Of course, it is doubtful that Zhuangzi philosophy can channel a huge stream of modern civilization in other direction. Emerging technology breakthroughs in a number of fields, including robotics, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, biotechnology, Internet of Things, 3D printing and autonomous vehicles bring into existence the so-call the fourth industrial revolution. Particularly, the speedy development of artificial intelligence technology threatens mankind's very existence. Many futurologists and intellectuals predict that Homo sapiens, or modern humans is about to arrive the last phase of evolution, and

machines will surpass them. Under the circumstance, Zhuangzi philosophy raises some pretty fundamental questions: is current urban civilization proper to human nature?; is it advantageous for human survival in evolution?; if not, what kind of options can we anticipate? Even though these questions are not clear answered, we can reach a new understanding of urban civilization through them, and, if necessary, change the discipline into it. This is the genuine role of urban humanity.

Nature, Subject and Modernity

It is no exaggeration to say that worldwide environmental issues began with the emergence of modern civilization. Before the modern times, there were localized disasters and pollutions, which could be cured naturally. However, the relationship between human, nature and cities changed drastically. As modern urban models were globally accepted, they dominated the way of human settlement across the continent. The model was created based on modernity. Architects and planners represent idealized worlds, and project them into the reality. In this regard, the modern model was utopian, closed in end, and implied the representation of the ideal of the time. Despite the passage of long times, it sustains its original operative mechanism. Le Corbusier's <la Ville Radieuse> in the 1920s and Norman Foster's <Masdar City> in the 2000s, show big difference in their contents. Whereas the former realized the modern machine city, the latter contains the ideal of contemporary eco-city. However, they reveals a great similarity in an approach into planning process between representation and projection. We can define it as modern urban model, where nature does not have such status as it enjoyed before. It became objectified, and is regarded as an elements of urban functions, as Le Corbusier made connection between nature and the well-being of urban dwellers in his urban proposals.

After opening doors to the West, East Asian countries struggled to accept the modern urban model for survival. As understood in slogans like 'the Eastern ways and Western frames (東道西器)', 'the Western Functionality with Chinese Substance (中體西用)', 'the Japanese spirit and Western learning (和魂洋才)', their will to achieve the civilized enlightenment through the acceptance of western civilization was so strong and intense. Nowadays, the modern urban model dominated the major mechanism operating East Asian cities. Current East Asian megacities are the outcomes of such modern models. However, in the process, as Zhuangzi claimed, East Asians lost themselves in the pursuit of things. Most of traditional

settlements were destroyed amid colonization, war and urban development.

Here is the reason why we shed new light on Zhuangzi philosophy from ecological point of view. The Zhuangzi philosophy is located at the antipode of modern models. His major ideas like *wuwei* (non-doing), *wuyong* (uselessness), *wuji* (removal of self) provides one of the most contrasting viewpoints against principle of causality, utilitarianism and subject-centered modernity. On top of that, Zhuangzi had totally different views over nature and environment from modern intellectuals. The attempt to understand his ideas from ecological perspective, help us overcome the limit of modern development model, and suggest a new kind of human settlement.

In Zhuangzi philosophy, the concept of subject takes an opposing stand against that of modernity. Modern intellectuals started from humanism, and developed a subject-centered ontology and epistemology in modern times. Western philosophy from Descartes' 'cogito', Immanuel Kant's pure reason, to Husserl's transcendental subjectivity and Heidegger's *dasein*, placed the subject at the center of world representation. In this case, nature was regarded as an object which can be recomposed by subject. Modern park and greenery in urban space were born in such context. In contrast, Zhuangzi continues to negate and get rid of subject-centered idea, but claimed it to be part of nature. Thus, Zhuangzi said that "Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and everything is one with me," (Zhuangzi, Inner chapter 2, Discussion on making all things equal). He dreamt to follow the harmonious order and changes in nature. From Taoist perspective, *ziran* (nature) is a key concept that literally means "so of itself". Thus, its meaning is distinct from Western meaning of nature. In *Daodejing*, Laozi said, "Man follows the way of Earth. Earth follows the way of Heaven. Heaven follows the way of the Dao. And the Dao follows the way of nature. (Laozi, *Daodejing*, Book 34). Under the circumstance, human is merely one expression of nature's numerous modes. For this reason, Zhuangzi negates subject, and pursues a unified world where subject and object are undivided. Zhuangzi said, "he who mounts the balance of Heaven and Earth, rides on the changes of the six qi, and wander the inexhaustible – what would such a man be dependent on? Thus it is said: the Perfect Man lacks all self; the Spirit-like Man lacks all merit; the Sage lacks all fame (Zhuangzi, Chapter 1 Free and Easy Wandering).

Timeless Changes and Uselessness

East Asian cities scarcely reflect Zhuangzi's ideas. Only the maximization of economic benefits and effectiveness dominates urban space. As Henri Lefebvre sharply pointed out, the capitalism tends to enlarge market size by instigating the desire of consumption. A huge circuit of capital from a cycle of investment-production-consumption to another expansive cycle, became a major mechanism of making urban space. Particularly, in East Asia with dense population, urban space is an important tool to make expansive reproduction possible. Real estate market dominates architectural discipline. For this reason, the density of large cities continues to increase and their boundaries expand as far as urban space brought benefits. Nature is inserted as a way of increasing the value of surrounding area.

This thought is well demonstrated by new towns around Seoul, which were constructed in enormous speed since 1990s. Architects and planners tried to establish eco-friendly plans, but their initial intent were largely frustrated by developers and construction companies which pursued maximal profits, and technocrats who targeted tangible objectives of urban policies. Accordingly, as seen in Songdo and Sejong cities which have urban population with just over 100,000 inhabitants, 30 story apartment flats were constructed without any hesitation. Pedestrian road plan were reorganized into car-oriented street network. This means that current urban problems come from capitalist mechanism which are based on human desire and comfort.

Korean new cities are going in opposite direction compared to European eco-cities like Freiburg and Malmö, where low-rise buildings coexist with natural environment. Barring cars entering into urban center, the municipal governments of these cities encourage to ride bicycle. These cities achieves a perfect energy independence thanks to the living pattern which is impossible in East Asian megacities. For the implementation of eco-friendly urban policies, inhabitants' engagement is crucial. They have to elicit a voluntary agreement with municipal governments. However, Korean new cities did not have the governance to enable the bottom-up decision making. Planners' suggestions on ecological design and technology have some limits.

Nowadays, the planning of urban environment in East Asia largely depends on developers who want to maximize profits and technocrats who want to show off short-term results, so Zhuangzi's idea of nature is totally reversed. If Zhuangzi confront with this situation, he would resist it. According to him, "success, gain, and ingenious contrivances, and artful

cleverness, must be forgotten in the (proper) mind of man.” (Zhuangzi, Outer chapter 12, Heaven and Earth). An emphasis of the communality of architecture and the emergence of a trend to unify architecture, landscape and urbanism into an entity are meaningful in line with Zhuangzi philosophy. They are considered as a sign of resistance to commercialization.

The pursuit of effectiveness in urban space is another principle of contemporary urban planning. Architects and planners applied to urban planning the Fordism which describes modern economic and social systems based on industrialized, standardized mass production and mass consumption. Urban space has been transformed in accordance with this system. For the mass production of housing and buildings, modern architects divided parts of urban space, granted proper functions to them and recomposed them from the viewpoint of effectiveness. This idea turned into mosaic space. However, this approach to cities made great difficulties in evolving the established urban area spontaneously. As Christopher Alexander proved it in his famous essay, ‘A City is not a Tree’, most of modern new cities based on functionalism and effectiveness became deteriorated. There, the nature was developed for human comfort, and degenerated into a tool for material affluence. If we borrow Zhuangzi’s expression, “they lose themselves in their pursuit of things, and lose their nature in their study of what is vulgar” (Zhuangzi, Outer chapter 16, Correcting the Nature).

These aspects of contemporary cities reflect inevitable reality because they accommodate more than 10 million inhabitants. Many regulatory systems are needed to control the expansive urban areas. Diverse uses of land are designated to each plot, and the height of building is limited in 3 dimensional way. Without such regulatory details, large cities cannot sustain in orderly way. However, strict zoning system remove the complexity of urban space, emphasizing current uses and density. The monopoly of modern urban model started from this method. If Zhuangzi revives from the dead, he would criticize the functionalism and effectiveness of modern urban model, saying “all men know the advantage of being useful, but no one knows the advantage of being useless (Zhuangzi, Inner chapter 4, Man in the World, Associated with other Men). Here, his paradoxical word, ‘the more useless, the more useful’, can bring new awareness to urban planners.

Another serious problem in the modern model is that it was not adaptable to the change of the future. When master plans were established for the construction of new cities, they were regarded as ideal at that time, but did not accurately consider subsequent changes in the cities.

Cities will change ceaselessly with increase or decrease of population and development of new technology. However, modern urban model was planned from one fixed point, which makes it hard to evolve in the future. Zhuangzi criticized the idea of 'being useful' because it has difficulties in reflecting new changes. Daoism is far from Platonic ideality. Instead it pursues flexible adaptation to natural change. In this regard, Laozi said, "all things would be self-evolving" (Laozi, Chapter 37). He also said, "a man with the greatest benevolence is like that of water which benefits all things while competes with nothing, and is willing to flow to the lowest point where everyone tries to leave behind". Following Laozi's idea on change, Zhuangzi goes further, suggesting its principle. "Following the transformation of things, man keeps fast hold of the fundament of them" (Zhuangzi, Inner chapter 5, The Seal of Virtue Complete).

New vision over East Asian urbanity

Zhuangzi, above all, believes that the nature is self-evolving, so human must follow the laws of nature. His thought is differentiated from modern ecological trends which try to address urban problems with cutting-edge technology. He believes that such technology can solve them partially, but not fundamentally. Of course, it is almost impossible to apply his idea to contemporary capitalist urban system in full swing. However, the lessons from Zhuangzi can raise new visions over how to approach environmental issues and how to harmonize artificial planning with self-evolving nature. It is time to imagine new urbanity proper to Zhuangzi's idea.