Hanzhengjie — an Informal City

Ma Zhenhua*1 and Long Yuan2

1 Doctorate Candidate, Research Center of Urban Environment, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, P.R. China
2 Professor, Research Center of Urban Environment, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, P.R. China

Abstract

Based on historical study and social analysis, this article reveals the inner logic of spatial transformation over the past several hundred years of the Hanzhengjie district in the city of Wuhan. It also focuses on the concept of informality and everyday life, using some interesting case studies to discuss the relationship between the evolution and revolution of its urban morphology and everyday life. As a result, the author proposes that the perspectives of urban informality and everyday life are necessary compensations for modern rational planning, and objectively argues that the life here is a value that we should preserve to some extent.

Keywords: everyday life; urban morphology; self-build; Informality; Hanzhengjie characteristic

1. Introduction

Hanzhengjie—the main street in old Hankow, Wuhan—is located at the point where the Yangtze River and Han Rivers merge, as shown in Fig.1. More than 500 years ago, because of the convenient transportation by ship, the street boomed and flourished with commercial activity. It has been an important commercial center of Wuhan and the largest wholesale market of small commodities in Central China since then. At a result, it has gained the honor of "No. 1 Street in the World" (Liu Fudao, 2001).

Today, the size of Hanzhengjie has expanded from the original development of a street to an area of about 1.69 square kilometers, which includes more than 460 streets and alleys (Fig.2.). It has 26 communities in the region, and hosts a population of nearly 300,000, with the immigrant population accounting for 60% (Zhu Wenrao, 1997).

For urban space research, the authors incline to a holistic point of view, including the spatial, historical and social (Edward Soja, 1996). Thereby, adopting the following two principles:

1) Historical study: As is well known, the past is the basis of the present and future. As space is always in a state of change, including evolution and revolution, we should pay much attention to the entire process: the emergence, development and evolution of urban space.

2) Everyday life study: To some extent, space is a product of society (Henry Lefebvre, 1991). The innate character of a space has a close connection with human beings and their everyday life. The authors have argued for some time that talking to the residents of Hanzhengjie and collecting their stories is the best way...
to understand the heart of the space.

As a matter of fact, these two principles are consistent, because history itself is literally composed of stories: History = His-Story.

2. Historical Study

Over a period of about 150 years, Hanzhengjie has been transformed tremendously in several ways, as has the spatial structure as shown in the following 4 illustrations. The whole process could be divided into 5 parts according to different times and social policies.

2.1 Molding Period (1850's—1911)

In the 1850's, the land in Hanzhengjie was as expensive as gold, and because there were a lot of ponds around Hanzhengjie, the city could only grow in high density three-dimensionally.

This resulted in the primary feature of the urban morphology of Hanzhengjie: the "fishbone-pattern" space system. There has been a convention regarding the naming of streets from historical times. Streets run parallel to the Han River from east to west and lanes perpendicular from south to north (Xu Zhi, 2003). The major streets all connect to the Han River and there are always temples at the beginning of the streets for religious blessings. The lanes are 30 to 250 meters long and about 15 to 20 meters wide, which developed through the functioning of everyday life (Fig.3.).

2.2 Expansion Period (1911 — 1949)

From 1911, Hanzhengjie began to extend into the hinterland cities as the Concession of Hankow and the railways came into being. From then on, the Hanzhengjie area turned itself into small commodities markets.

The major transformations in the form of the city occurred in the lower reaches of the Han River. Spontaneous settlements emerged, forming a self-built community like a labyrinth. Linear growth of the city along the river led to more frequent movement of people in an east-west direction. This produced four streets running parallel to the Han River - River Street, Main Street, Jia Street, Dam Street — or Back Street, as a whole. The emergence of River Street in 1930 separated the inland alleys of Hanzhengjie from the Han River system for the first time. (Fig.4.).

2.3 Stagnation Period (1949 — 1970's)

During this period, the population increased beyond imagination very quickly and as a result the courtyards and some of the remaining spaces between the buildings were occupied. The "fishbone-pattern" spatial structure of Hanzhengjie was preserved to some extent. This was the time of Economic Planning in China, and the modern industries needed larger spaces, which was rather contradictory to the "fishbone-pattern" fabric of space and incompatible with the scale of the traditional alleys. In terms of the concept regarding both physical space and social space, the traditional meaning of Hanzhengjie was alienated.

2.4 Recovery Period (1979 — 1990)

In 1979, the people of Hanzhengjie began the resumption of wholesale markets for small commodities. Since then, the economic planning system was dismantled and Hanzhengjie entered a phase of rapid development. Large factories were gradually removed or functionally transformed in the urban areas. Thus, the "fishbone-pattern" fabric of the general city space concept was strengthened to a large extent (Fig.5.).

2.5 Reform Period (1990 — 2007)

In the 1990s, Hanzhengjie launched the transformation of the old city. The standard pattern
that evolved was the network of roads and skyscrapers, which were absurdly superimposed on a large scale on the traditional buildings of the "fishbone-pattern" structure. This was an enormous contradiction and represented a kind of collision in terms of the entire concept of the city. Life and business became "vertical" in accordance with the new functions, with the alleys and lanes being transformed into indoor malls. Hanzhengjie was thus gradually deleted from memory (Fig.6.).

3. Everyday Life Study

The authors did not have a pre-set topic in their study of Hanzhengjie, but emphasized the need to penetrate deep into the community, while trying to assume the identity of a citizen of Hanzhengjie. With this in mind, walking in Hanzhengjie became a basic research method. The authors were able to easily eliminate their identity and re-map the cognitive map of Hanzhengjie through physical interaction with the environment during their walks, thereby finding possibilities of re-integrating the urban spaces.

The following research is interesting — each topic has produced a meaningful and important paper representing a unique path to "anatomizing" Hanzhengjie through details obtained after observation and experience.

3.1 Biandan (porter)

Biandan in Hanzhengjie means porter (Fig.7.). The Biandans give a unique interpretation to the city on account of different wandering traces.

3.2 From doorplates to street

There are many kinds of doorplate in the Hanzhengjie area, and one can easily identify the streets according to the same names on the doorplates. Interestingly, the streets here are quite different from the traditional ones, they are no longer in single direct lines and their borders are very blurred. Obviously, some streets form blocks (Fig.8.).

3.3 Interstice space

The interstice space in Hanzhengjie is the remaining space between buildings and roads. It is the typical pattern of the outer spaces or spontaneous settlement areas. There are many types of interstice space in Hanzhengjie, which can be combined according to different logics in different regions. Various types of interstice space provide multi-level activities for the public (Fig.9.).
3.4 Business liquidity
The mobile market is an informal commercial space where merchandise is displayed and transactions are carried out. Making the best use of the street space it constitutes the flow of Hanzhengjie, and enriches the street life (Fig.10.).

3.5 Clothing workshop space
Production space is an important feature of Hanzhengjie, and differs from the other commercial streets. It is also an indispensable element of the economic system of Hanzhengjie. Nowadays, the clothing production workshops are the leading industry in Hanzhegjie, and are concentrated in the spontaneous settlement area at the lower reaches of Han River. The space of the clothing workshops is to a large extent informal (Fig.11.).

3.6 Jinchang terrace
Fig.12. above shows the large transition terrace of Jinchang Building, which is no more than 600 square meters. It is a compact city, accommodating 4 clinics, 3 kindergartens, 10 grocery stores, 3 barber shops, 5 beauty salons, 3 DVD rental shops, 2 internet bars, 13 restaurants, some small workshops, a business management office, and fitness facilities. Therefore, when you are on the transition terrace, you will find yourself in a typical microscopic city and will be shocked by the various activities of everyday life. (Jane Jacobs, 1961).

3.7 The empty space
During the course of the transformation in Hanzhengjie, some empty spaces were left, which became a paradise for the children. The building rubble...
following demolition was creatively changed into children's entertainment props (Fig.13.).

3.8 Public toilets

The public toilets in Hanzhengjie have become a place for people to communicate with each other. Toilet attendants usually live in the management house of the toilets, and use the street space in front of the toilet as a kitchen and living room. As a result, the toilets become very multi-functional (Fig.14.).

3.9 Self-built staircases

The self-built staircase could be seen as a kind of miracle in the Hanzhengjie setting, while their forms and materials reflect the self-building capacity of local residents and are related to the problems of urban density (Fig.15.).

4. Conclusion

The main focus of this paper has been a thorough research of Hanzhengjie. Through historical study, the paper has shown the terrible change of the spatial structure over the years, with the "fishbone-pattern" structure being destroyed. Following a study of everyday life, it has shown the significant characteristics of Hanzhengjie: conflict and mystery (William Rowe, 2001). Furthermore, the authors discovered the close relationship between space and everyday life of residents here. Happily, this relationship has not been greatly influenced or affected by the modern concepts of development, but rather has, to a large extent, survived through the protection of its traditional fabric. In conclusion it can be said that the interconnectivity which exists between everyday life and the settlement in the case of Hanzhengjie is underlined as a major quality in its concept of an informal living environment (Ananya and Nezar, 2003). In a word, Hanzhengjie, which originated from everyday life, is an informal city.

Acknowledgement

Special recognition and appreciation is due to support by the National Natural Science Support Fund (Contract No. 50778076).

References


Endnotes

2 From Google earth
5 From Wuhan Archives Museum
6 From Wuhan Archives Museum
7 From Wuhan Archives Museum
8 From Wuhan Archives Museum