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Planning and conservation in historic Chinese cities

*The case of Xi’an*

Although the literature on urban development in China has been expanding in recent years, relatively little has been written about the challenge and changes to historic Chinese cities. Historic preservation was an established national policy from 1949. This paper reviews the planning and development experience in the large historic cities since 1949 using Xi’an as a case study. An examination of the impact of national legislation and related policies indicated that the system was only successful in protecting some of the most important historic buildings and sites. The belated introduction of more comprehensive protection and conservation measures in the early 1980s achieved only limited results since much of the historic character of the urban townscape had already been lost. Since 1980, economic reform and increased land values have placed additional pressures on these historic towns. This resulted in the total break-up of old town centres and the loss of many traditional houses. The urban skylines have become increasingly dominated by modern hotels, offices and commercial buildings rather than by traditional temples, towers and pagodas.

Within the context of alarming rates of growth in Third World cities during the 1960s and 1970s, many analysts found the Chinese urban development experience both interesting and potentially important in the search for more effective management of urban change. Under the Maoist model of development China was seen to have achieved industrialisation without the ‘over-urbanisation’ that was apparent in many Third World countries (Murphey, 1980; Kirkby, 1985; Tang, 1997). The uniqueness of the Chinese experience faded away during the late 1980s and 1990s when the country’s programme of economic reform contributed to a process of rapid urbanisation. This phenomenon has attracted

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1 Also known as Xian or Sian.
substantial interest in Western literature (Kirkby, 1985; Sit, 1985; 1995; Kwok, 1987; Cannon and Jenkins, 1990; Chen, 1991; Kim, 1991; Chan, 1996; Yeung, 1993; Wei, 1994; Zhao and Zhang, 1995; Fan, 1997; Wu, 1997; Wang and Murie, 1999). Attention has also been given to the expansion of particular major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou (Ma, 1985; Hou, 1986; Hall and Zhang, 1988; Wang and Hague, 1992; Sit, 1996; Lcaf, 1997; Chang, 1998; Wu, 1998; Xu and Kam, 1998). Some of these contributions also reported on the involvement of planning in guiding large-scale urban development (Xie and Costa, 1991; 1993; Wang, 1992). However, relatively little has been written to date about the challenge and changes to historic cities. In China urban renewal, protection and preservation of historic interests have been important issues for urban planning. Since 1982, central government has designated 99 settlements as historic cities or towns. Various forms of state and local legislation have been introduced to guide the development and management of these towns.

The aim of this paper is to review the recent planning and development of historic Chinese cities using Xi’an as an example. The general evolution of legislation and other policies at national level since 1949 is reviewed first. This is followed by detailed examination of planning and development experience in Xi’an city with regard to protection and conservation of places of historic interest. The assessment of the Xi’an experience involves a review of three overall city plans (1953, 1983 and 1995) and other key policy documents which have shaped the style and scale of urban development.

National policies on protection of historic interests

Since 1949 various measures have been taken by central government to guide the treatment of historic buildings and heritage sites. Immediately after coming to power the Communist government issued several policy directives in 1951 to protect historic interests. These policies instructed local government to protect major historic structures or buildings and their attachments, including sites of old city walls, palaces, military barriers, castles, tombs, towers, academies of classic learning, temples, gardens, ruins, housing, stelae, statues and stone inscriptions. Particular attention was given to the protection of sites related to the early history of the Communist Revolution (Zhao, 1994). Any demolition was required to be approved by the relevant authority at regional or national level. Subsequent documentation classified historic interests into two categories with the most important ones under the control of the central government and the less important ones under the control of local government. During the large-scale industrial development during the period covered by the First Five-Year Plan (1953–57), special policy instructions were issued to protect historic interests. A number of historic cities including Xi’an, for which important developments were planned, received specific attention. In these cities developers were required to consult the Ministry of Culture before undertaking construction in historic areas. In 1956 the State Council also issued policies to protect the ruins of historic cities that were situated within rural areas (Zhao, 1994).
In 1961 the State Council published the first list of 180 key national historic sites. The Provincial Ordinance of Historic Interests Protection and Management (Zhao, 1994) was also issued at this time. This Ordinance specified several areas for protection and instructed local authorities to set up special organisations to manage and maintain important sites. A survey of the listed buildings and sites was conducted during the following year. At the time of survey, 123 of the 180 key sites had dedicated management arrangements and 18 were being run as museums. The remainder were under the control of various authorities. These policy developments were interrupted by the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976; during this period many historic buildings and sites were destroyed, especially religious temples and other interests not protected by national government. Where the buildings were not demolished, in some cases the internal contents and decorations were lost (Zhao, 1994). It was not until 1980 that effective policies were restored in this important area. New measures were initially proposed in 1981 by the then State Bureau of Historic Interests Management. Severe damage to major historic interests such as the Great Wall was noted in the Bureau’s report to the State Council. This report later led to new policies on protection and conservation.

A number of important developments occurred in 1982. A second group of 62 key national historic sites were designated by central government.2 (Late in 1988, another 258 were listed, bringing the total list to 499 at national level.) Another group of 44 rural sites was declared as national preserved-landscape areas. In addition there was an important policy shift away from protecting individual buildings and sites toward a more comprehensive approach. The new approach involved the designation of ‘Historic Cities or Towns’. Initially 24 cities and towns were designated by the central government in this way (Zhao, 1994). These Historic Cities and Towns included well-known national capitals such as Xi’an, Kaifeng, Nanjing, and Beijing, as well as smaller towns such as Jingdezhen, the imperial pottery town, and Yanan, the Communist base during the 1930s and 1940s. In December 1986 a second group of 38 Historic Cities and Towns was designated including large industrial cities such as Shanghai, Tianjin, Shenyang, Chongqing and some small towns such as Pingyao which was later declared a United Nations (UN) World Heritage Site. By 1998 a total of 99 cities and towns in China had been designated as Historic Cities and Towns (Cui et al., 1996).

In 1982 the first significant piece of legislation, known as the Protection of Historic Interests Act of the People’s Republic of China, was enacted. This Act formalised the approval procedures for the designation of historic cities and towns. It also made provisions for the historic buildings in the surrounding areas to be subject to more stringent planning control. In historic cities and towns it was necessary for planning and development proposals to meet special requirements. A Historic City Protection Plan had to be produced for these cities and approved along with an Overall Plan. Special Area Plans were also

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2 There are local lists at different levels as well, for example provincial lists and county lists.
encouraged for important buildings or sites. These plans were required to emphasise each city’s unique characteristics, to reflect the distinctive local natural and historic features and to preserve existing land use patterns. Further measures known as the Implementation Details of the Protection of Historic Interests Act were issued by the State Council in 1992, which formalised the official role of historic interests authorities in urban planning and development. Within the surrounding areas of historic buildings and sites the design aspects of development projects needed to be approved by the historic interests authority before going to the planning authority.

This brief description has provided an introduction to the development of policy at national level. Interpretation and implementation of national policies has varied from place to place. The remainder of the paper will focus on a case study of Xi’an, and will examine planning practice and the impact of these national policies at local level since 1949.

**Historical development of Xi’an**

Xi’an is one of China’s six major historic capitals. A number of famous ancient cities were located within the immediate environs of Xi’an, including Fengjing and Gaojing of the West Zhou dynasty (eleventh century BC to 771 BC), Xianyang of the Qin dynasty (211 BC to 207 BC) and Changan of the Western Han (206 BC to 24 AD), Sui (581 AD to 618 AD) and Tang (618 AD to 907 AD) dynasties (Ma, 1985; Hall and Zhang, 1988; Wang and Hague, 1992; Research Association of Famous Historic Culture Cities, 1996). The development of the current site was initiated by the Sui dynasty over 1400 years ago. The shortlived Sui dynasty began the building of this capital city and gave it the name of Daxing Cheng (‘big and prosperous city’). Tang continued the development and renamed the city Changan Cheng as in the Han dynasty (‘always peaceful city’). Tang Changan Cheng was the largest city in the world of its time with a population of over a million in a built-up area of 84 square kilometres (Tongji University City Planning Group, 1985).

At the end of the Tang dynasty Changan was demolished by rebels and the region lost its national capital position. A much smaller Xin Cheng (new city) was constructed on the foundations of the old imperial city by the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). The name of the settlement was changed to Fengyuan Cheng (‘serve Yuan city’). During the Ming dynasty this city was enlarged and reinforced. Because the Ming capital was situated in the east, the city was eventually renamed Xi’an which means ‘peace in the west’. Xi’an became the military stronghold of the north west and south west and its walls were higher and thicker than those of other settlements of similar size and were strengthened several times during the Ming period. In 1568 the rammed-earth wall was covered by bricks. This city wall (13.79 kilometres in length) has generally retained its historic form (He, 1996). During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the entire north-east part of the city was exclusively used by the Manchurian rulers and their military forces (Fig. 1). In 1911 when the Qing dynasty was overthrown the Manchurian quarter was demolished by fire.
Railway links between Xi’an and the eastern part of the country were developed in 1934 and this lead to the introduction of modern industries. Before the Communist take-over in 1949 Xi’an was a city of approximately 380,000 people with a few factories specialising in textiles and small-scale manufacturing. The built-up area was less than 14 square kilometres. Public facilities were very poor with no piped water supply or public transport system. Ordinary housing standards were low and many residents lived in simple, single-storey structures made of earth, bricks and timber. There was severe overcrowding resulting from the influx of refugees from the eastern part of the country, particularly Henan Province, during the Japanese invasion from 1937 to 1945 (Wang, 1992; 1995.) Despite these conditions the city’s built environment contained many structures and sites of historic interests including the City Wall and associated Gates, the Bell Tower, the Drum Tower, the Big Goose Pagoda, the Small Goose Pagoda, the Forest of Stelae, and the Islamism Mosque. In 1949 there were no modern high-rise blocks and consequently these larger traditional structures dominated the skyline and were important elements of the urban landscape.

**Toward a socialist industrial base: the 1953 plan**

The years from 1949 through the period of the *First Five-Year Plan (1953–57)* were characterised by national policies aimed at reconstruction and urban-based industrial development, particularly in the inland areas. In 1953 Xi’an was designated as a major inland development centre despite its historic significance. The key industrial growth sectors were textiles, electronic instruments and...
munitions. The expansion of educational and research establishments was planned and funded by central government alongside these industrial initiatives.

The first official Overall Plan for Xi’an was prepared in 1953. The plan was developed in line with the prevailing Soviet ideology which held 'city planning is the continuity of national economic planning'. Approved by central government in 1954, it was a 20-year plan (1953–72) which defined the future of Xi’an as 'a light and precision machinery and instrument manufacturing and textile industrial city' (Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Management Bureau, 1984). The plan was above all a technical document addressing the engineering infrastructure and land use requirements of a major urban industrial development.

The total land use required for the projected population was calculated in accordance with the centrally defined land use standards. The projected population was expected to reach 1.22 million by 1972. The whole area was then divided into different functional zones for industry, administration and commerce, residence, culture and education (Fig. 2). The old walled city was protected from industrial activities. New industrial developments were grouped together and located to the east and west of the city some four kilometres from the city wall. Additional residential areas were planned between the city wall and the new industrial districts. Belts of trees were proposed between the industrial districts and major residential areas. The southern suburb was planned as the 'cultural area' combining residential, educational and research and cultural uses.

Fig. 2 Xi’an city in 1980 after major development proposed by the 1953 Overall Plan (source: based on map of Xi’an produced in 1985)
In order to protect the important site of the Han capital city, which was listed by central government, no major development was planned for the northern suburbs. Within these areas some allowance was made for warehousing and the expansion of railway workers’ accommodation along the railway line immediately outside the city wall. Within the central area the street pattern and planned road system envisaged sympathetic continuity with the regular grid pattern of the ancient Tang Changan city. However, the key emphasis of the plan was on industrial development and the intention was to change the historic city of ‘consumption’ to a city of ‘socialist production’.

This first Overall Plan played an important role in providing the framework for urban expansion. It was regarded as one of the most successful plans prepared by China’s city planners prior to 1980. As the key inland city of the period Xi’an attracted not only capital investment but also planning expertise from central government. The effective coordination of economic investment and land use planning allowed the city to develop in a comprehensive manner. Although the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution disrupted the effectiveness of planning practice, the basic land use pattern had been well established (Gui, 1987). In 1980 the city had a built-up area of 129 square kilometres (over nine times its size in 1949) and a population of nearly 1.5 million. The industrial districts formed an important part of the economic base in inland China. The higher education sector consisted of many well-established universities and colleges (Hall and Zhang, 1988).

Although the major new developments in Xi’an were successfully implemented in the outer suburbs, the plan did not provide clear guidance on the protection of historic interests. The old town was expected to be integrated gradually with the new areas. Most of the historic features of the old town were allowed to remain including the areas of private housing. Historic buildings and their surrounding environments were planned as urban open space, but no detailed policies on protection and conservation were included in the plan. Some years later after official adoption of the plan many important buildings and structures were listed for protection by both central and local government. The City Wall and the associated outer protection moat, for example, were among the first group of national historic buildings listed by central government in 1961. However, underfunding and neglect resulted in disrepair and lack of necessary maintenance. Some parts of the wall were destroyed by new road development or by local residents who removed the bricks in order to build temporary houses. The outer moat had become a refuse dump and some parts of it were completely filled in.

There was also no comprehensive policy to preserve the historic features of the whole city. The early protection activities were a crude response to the general requirements of central policy. Although the plan was successful in forming the major functional zones in the city, it was much less effective in controlling small incremental changes in the central area. Most key government departments and public organisations were housed within the central area, which led to the replacement of older houses by office buildings. Most of these office buildings were poorly designed.
With very limited public housing investment from the government, housing conditions in the central area degenerated substantially. Weak planning and development control powers resulted in many temporary additions of poor quality and infill development within the already overcrowded residential areas. Small-scale industrial projects were also built within the central area by lower-tier government and neighbourhood authorities. As a result the historical settings of important structures such as the City Wall, the Bell Tower and the Drum Tower were altered significantly. The large-scale increase in industrial land use and population also served to destroy the historic atmosphere of the town. The magnificent City Wall could no longer be seen from a distance in the suburbs. It has now become a small ring which encloses the inner areas. One has to travel along the congested urban road for a good distance before reaching the Wall. Nevertheless, in comparison with other major cities, the decision to keep the Wall in Xi’an was a good one. Beijing City Wall was completely destroyed during the 1950s to make space for new roads. In retrospect, the designation of Xi’an as an industrial city under the 1953 Overall Plan had serious detrimental consequences for preserving the national heritage although the planned expansion of state-owned enterprises made an important contribution to the national and regional economy.

The rediscovery of historic values: the 1983 plan

Since 1976, China has initiated a series of policy changes relating to the planning and development of cities. The State Council’s Third National City Work Conference, held in Beijing in March 1978, began a new era in urban development and planning. After this conference most cities started to make new plans or revise old ones. Central government funding for capital investment in urban public facilities was also increased dramatically. In Xi’an a new city planning authority was set up to prepare an updated plan for the city in 1980. The revised Overall Plan (1980–2000) was approved by the State Council in 1983. Like the 1953 plan it had a 20-year planning horizon which anticipated significant enlargement of the built-up area of the city to 168 square kilometres. The revised plan incorporated some of the major features of the 1953 plan and aimed to consolidate the existing functional zones. The future of Xi’an was defined as ‘a city of advanced sciences, culture and education with textile and machinery manufacturing industries as the main sectors, and tourist trade based on the protection of the city’s historic features’ (Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Management Bureau, 1983, 6). This definition differs from the single-minded industrial approach adopted in 1953 and reflects the shift away from the national policy to locate traditional manufacturing industries in major cities. Typical service sectors such as science, culture and education were now seen as the key areas for urban expansion, while the established textile and manufacturing industries were to continue operating in their present locations. The most interesting additions were the tourist function and protection of historic features. However, the stated purpose of protecting historic features was directly related to promotion of tourism. This reflected the renewed drive for
economic development. The emphasis on historic values was also related to the 1974 discovery of the Emperor's Terracotta Warriors (near the First Emperor, Qin Shihuang's tomb) in the most easterly suburb. This discovery has increased the significance of Xi'an as an important international tourist centre.

At this time the planning process was still very mechanical. Total land use requirements for the city were determined from a population target. In 1980 the base population of the city was 1.49 million and the projected figures in the plan were 1.59 million by 1985 and 1.8 million by 2000 (Fig. 3). The average available urban land per person was reduced from 108 square metres in the 1953 Plan to 90 square metres in the 1980 Plan. For planning purposes the city was divided into 10 residential districts comprising the old town, south, south west, west, north west, north, north east, east and south east and the free-standing textile district in the eastern suburb. The districts were subdivided by major roads into areas ranging from 40–180 hectares with about 20,000 people each. The planning framework for new housing development in these subdistricts was

3 The central non-agricultural population in 1996 was 2.2 million, well over the target for 2000 (State Statistics Bureau, 1998).
based upon neighbourhoods of 20–40 hectares without major through traffic routes. Residential floor space per person was kept at nine square metres while the level of density in terms of plot rates was increased. The plan required that new residential buildings must be at least three storeys. The standard distance between buildings was reduced significantly from 2.0–2.5 times building height to 1.1–1.3 times building height (Xi'an Municipal Urban Planning and Management Bureau, 1983).

In accordance with the national urban development policy at that time ‘to control the size of large cities, develop medium cities in a rational manner, and rigorously develop small cities’, industrial development in Xi’an was to be strictly regulated. Transportation and the road system were also major issues in the revised plan. New roads were proposed for the expanded areas. Three ring roads were planned to reduce traffic volumes within the city: the inner ring road immediately outside the old City Wall was to be enlarged; the new outer ring road was aligned at the edge of the enlarged built-up area; and the intermediate ring road was located between the two. The 1980 Plan also made detailed arrangements for water supply, power, sewage, historic building protection, urban open space and parks. The result was a plan for a compact grid of urban development infilling the then existing gaps between the walled city and the industrial areas.

Some innovative policies were also proposed in the 1980 Plan. Greater attention was given to specific mechanisms for the protection of historic buildings and increased resources were allocated for their maintenance. The revised plan included a comprehensive conservation policy as required by national legislation. Protection was extended beyond the listed building itself. Three spatial zones were proposed for each major listed building: absolute protection zone, impact zone, and environmental coordination zone. The absolute protection zone included the historic building itself and the open spaces within its original boundary, for example a temple and its yard and original wall. Within this zone the existing landscape and structure were totally protected. No new development was permitted except improvement work by the historic building authority itself. The extent of the impact zone was determined by the height of the historic building. The higher the building the wider the impact zone. In most cases development within the impact zone was required to be lower than 23 metres. Controls were also imposed on the external appearance of surrounding buildings. Development of hospitals, factories, and noisy or dangerous projects were not permitted within the impact zone. The environmental coordination zone was designed to control the skyline and landscape spatially related buildings. Tall structures which might block important views were forbidden (Xi'an Municipal Urban Planning and Management Bureau, 1983, 22).

Increased attention was given to the historic City Wall. A special Subject Plan was made covering the development of the City Wall, the outside protection moat and the associated open space to form an integrated public park. This rectangular Ring Park is about 2,800 metres from north to south and 4,400 metres from east to west. The average width of the Ring Park is about 250 metres. The
Subject Plan made overall arrangements for preservation, protection, restoration and rebuilding of the Wall and Gates. These policies included the following specific actions:

- restoration of the Wall itself: due to neglect over a very long period the Wall was in a very poor condition by the early 1980s. Over the centuries the number of openings in the Wall had been increased from four to 16. The plan proposed to restore the entire length of the Wall using specially made large bricks. Retention of the 12 extra openings was made possible through the provision of arches within the Wall.
- planting and landscaping of the associated open space;
- widening the inner ring road at the foot of the wall with provision of parking spaces at the access points to the top of the wall;
- improvement of the protection moat: clearance of debris, paving and linkage into the surface water system, construction of boating facilities, traditional pavilions, and so forth (Wu, 1984, 40–43).

The Subject Plan also proposed special building-height control within the vicinity of the Wall. On the inner side of the Wall, no new buildings over 12 metres in height (the height of the Wall itself) were permitted within a distance of 50 metres from the inside edge of the inner ring road. On the outer side of the Wall, no buildings over 24 metres in height were allowed within a distance of 50 metres from the outside edge of the external ring road. These proposals were largely implemented during the 1980s. The City-Wall Ring Park is now a major local attraction to tourists. The authority has been using this as a special facility to promote the city. Activities include an annual historic cultural festival and a traditional lantern festival. The Ring Park is also used as a prime venue for receiving important guests such as state visits by foreign leaders.4

The subject plan also proposed a reduction of the old-town population by 20 per cent which required the relocation of 70,000 residents to the area outside the city wall. Most of the old residential areas within the city wall were proposed for redevelopment since 90 per cent of the housing in question was classified as unfit. Many of these areas were damp and dangerous in the rainy season and lacking in sanitary and health facilities. The simple structures and poor quality of properties meant that redevelopment of housing in the city would involve demolition and replacement with new multi-storey and high-rise buildings, but there was also a specified change in the general land use pattern as much of the housing was to be replaced by public buildings, offices and commercial establishments.

These proposals were perceived as a strategy for modernisation by planners. In practice, there was a good measure of success in terms of development of a number of large publicly funded projects, including the completion of the City-Wall Ring Park, a new international airport and a new railway station, improvement of transportation links to the city and within the central area, and

4 The well-publicised visit by the US president in July 1998 is an example.
the building of the new Shaanxi Province Museum. Despite these achievements there were significant negative impacts on the historic city. Given the goal of retaining a compact city, only a moderate increase in the total land supply was permitted to accommodate population growth. Consolidation and central-area renewal became key features of the policies of this period. Traditional single-storey houses were usually designated for clearance and redevelopment. The high-density and high-rise approach brought many new housing and office blocks into the central area which gradually changed the historic urban texture and landscape inside the City Wall. Although the plan aimed to emphasise historic values, implementation actually served to erode the remaining historic features further. This can be demonstrated with reference to one of the most important renewal schemes—Nandajie (South Great Street), which involved a 750-metre-long street from the city centre to the South Gate of the City Wall. Before redevelopment the street was about 15 metres wide and was one of the city's busiest streets both for traffic and shopping. It occupied a prime location in respect of the historic features of the city, with the South Gate and the Bell Tower at each end, and no other building was taller than these two main landmarks. Unfortunately the whole street was demolished to provide a wider road with modern shopping and office buildings at both sides. The significance of the Bell Tower and South Gate were drastically reduced. The most controversial new building was the modern Bell Tower Hotel which was built alongside the Tower itself. The new structure blocks the views of visitors of the old Bell Tower, but does provide affluent visitors in the hotel with a bird's eye view of the ancient monument. Elsewhere the treatment of historic interests was also characterised by renewal and redevelopment rather than preservation and protection.

Impact of economic reform
The 1980 Overall Plan was made before the introduction of major urban economic reform policies. Planning proposals were based on the earlier 'planned economic approach', with the expectation that the state would be the key investor and developer. From 1984 new national policies were introduced to reform the urban economy, which gave greater emphasis to improving the efficiency of the state sector. At the same time private businesses were encouraged, particularly those involving overseas investment. The controls on population movement within the country were also relaxed. These shifts in policy had major implications for the planning practice.

Attracting outside funds became a key theme to urban planners toward the end of the 1980s. There were pressures for compromise in established conservation policies to accommodate new developments in both central and suburban areas. This began with the increased demand for hotel developments. With more and more visitors from abroad coming to Xi'an to see the Emperor's Warriors, international investors saw an opportunity to expand their businesses. Joint-venture hotels were constructed inside or outside the historic wall. These
buildings were the first modern tower blocks to encroach upon the traditional skyline.

There was also new demand for office and industrial developments. This led the municipal authority to alter the Overall Plan in 1988 to make provision for a High-Tech Zone in the southern suburbs of the city. The Xi’an High-Tech Development Zone was approved by the State Council in March 1991 as a zone of national importance covering a total area of 22.4 square kilometres, of which about 10 square kilometres was for new development. A series of favourable tax-reduction policies were applied in this area to attract local and international investment. The construction of the newly established area was started in June 1991. By the middle of 1995, it had attracted a total investment of 1.4 billion yuan (1$US = 8.2 yuan) with 1.57 million square metres of floor space under construction. There were over 2,500 enterprises registered in the district. The zone also included 22 universities and colleges and 49 research institutes with a total academic and professional work force of 60,000 (Administrative Committee of Xi’an High-Tech Development Zone, 1995).

In August 1992 Xi’an was approved as an open city by central government. This gave Xi’an similar powers to those enjoyed by most large cities along the eastern coast in attracting overseas investment and granting tax concessions. Important changes in the management of urban land were also made by central government. Land use fees based on market demand were introduced. This enabled the local government to use the public ownership of land to raise funds for urban development and other running costs. An urban land market subsequently emerged which has altered the land-utilisation process. Commercial property development has since become a major activity in Xi’an as in many other large cities. Property developers were encouraged to become involved in central-area redevelopment which yields financial benefits for the municipal government as well. Apart from land use fees the developers also become responsible for compensation of the original land users through either cash payments or replacement housing. To maximise the financial returns the redevelopment process generally involved replacing single-storey dwellings with multi-storey buildings. This resulted in large-scale dispersal and destruction of established local communities. After redevelopment very few of the original residents could be offered a move back to their former location. Most of them ended up in the cheaper new housing estates that were built in the suburban areas.

This renewal process was also generated by the local politicians’ attitude toward modernisation. The old houses in the central areas were seen by many politicians as symbols of poverty and backwardness. The older properties were poor in quality and lacking in the basic modern amenities in comparison with the new flatted houses. What was ignored by politicians was the historic landscape of the entire old town. The new developments put considerable pressure on the ageing urban infrastructure. Many tall buildings were approved for development inside the city wall against the established conservation policies. Some of these buildings were for commercial and office uses, while others were housing for the better off. The planning system was weakened and the development
process become market driven. Planning and development control had very limited influence on the design of new buildings. Little consideration was given to building style and the use of traditional materials. Most of the old buildings were single-storey structures made of timber, traditional bricks and dried-earth blocks. The roofs were covered with handmade grey tiles. In contrast the new buildings were at least three storeys in height and made of cement and machine-made red bricks. They were generally box-like in style with flat roofs. This clash of forms resulted in further erosion of the historic built environment in the city. This type of development has continued to date despite a good deal of criticism about high-density and high-rise construction in the central area.

**The 1995 plan**

In 1993, ten years after the formal approval of the 1980 Plan, the planning authority began to review and update the Overall City Plan.\(^5\) This review was carried out jointly by the Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Management Bureau and Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Design Institute.\(^6\) An outline proposal was made in July 1993 (Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Management Bureau and Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Design Institute, 1993) and the development of a new plan followed in 1994 (Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Management Bureau and Xi’an Municipal Planning and Design Institute, 1998). The approved plan has a timescale of 15 years from 1995 to 2010. The most important elements are the Overall Plan (or Master Plan) and the Planning Statement. In addition, there are 22 special plans and about 60 other maps (Zhou, 1995). In the 1995 Plan, the future of Xi’an is defined as

a world famous historic city; an important base for scientific research, higher education and high-tech industries within China; the largest central city in the west and central of north China; and the capital of Shaanxi Province. (Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Management Bureau and Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Design Institute, 1998, 2–3).

The specific objectives of the 1995 Plan were: to protect the old town; to lower the building density; to improve the central area; to apply the compact–city idea; to develop peripheral satellite towns; and to improve the environment (Xi’an

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5 This is also a requirement from central government. Most large cities reviewed the plans that were made during the early 1980s.

6 The Institute used to be a section of the Bureau. It was allowed to become independent and to undertake work on a consultancy basis for the city. Most plan making was done by the Institute while implementation and development control were carried out by the Bureau. The two bodies still occupied the same building. Some staff are available to work for both bodies. This allows the agencies to work closely on major strategic issues. The decision to form separate bodies was also a result of controls on the size of government departments in the city. The Institute’s staff are no longer counted as part of the Bureau’s employment. At the same time, the Institute now has more power to generate income through consultancy and service charges. The Bureau requires that developers’ site-control plans must be produced by the Institute. In a sense urban planning services in the city are under monopolistic control.
Municipal Urban Planning and Management Bureau and Xi'an Municipal Urban Planning and Design Institute, 1998). The overall long-term aim is to develop Xi'an as an economically prosperous, functionally complete, environmentally healthy and beautiful modern open city with its own unique historic features.

The planning objectives incorporate several important changes from previous plans. The protection of historic features has become the top priority. This policy has been supported by the introduction of the compact-city idea and the proposed expansion of the satellite towns. The future form of the city would be as a conurbation centred on the current built-up area with 11 satellite towns (Fig. 4). The central area was to be contained within the third ring road. Each dependent town was to have its own special functions and dominant industries including rural enterprises. Traffic congestion, environmental problems and shortage of water were all important factors which led to the adoption of the preferred development pattern.

In the new statement of planning objectives there was no mention of the textile and manufacturing industries which had featured prominently in the last two rounds of plans. Xi'an is located in a geographical area which is not very suitable for large-scale cotton production. For many years the raw materials were transported to the local factories in accordance with the provisions of state
economic plans. With the opening up of the market and the restructuring of industries, textile production in Xi’an eventually became problematic. By the mid-1990s the textile industrial district was troubled by massive unemployment problems. The dominant industries in the new plan were to be high-tech based. The newly established High-Tech Zone was promoted as an emerging silicon valley in the central and western regions of the country (Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Management Bureau and Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Design Institute, 1998; Han, 1994).

To take full advantage of the newly granted open-city status, the plan also focused upon trade. An Economic and Technology Development Zone was planned five kilometres to the north of the old town. This zone covered an area of about 10 square kilometres of flat farm land and a detailed control plan was made for it in 1995. The municipal government also provided funds to develop infrastructure, including water, electricity, heat, gas, and communication supply (Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Design Institute, 1995). The major road system and other basic infrastructure works for the zone were laid down first. A few big international companies (for example Coca-Cola) have set up their offices at this location (Administrative Committee for the Xi’an Economic and Technology Development Zone, 1996).

The planning of the two development zones, one in the north and one in the south, changed the basic land use pattern that was established during the 1950s. Instead of emphasising the east–west axis the 1995 plan shifted the emphasis on to the north–south axis to comply with the traditional fengshui which pays particular attention to the direction of the sun. The central north–south axis was referred to as the key Dragon artery in the city. A new Central Business District (CBD) was planned at the southern edge of the city with a new railway link to the south and a main station (Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Management Bureau and Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Design Institute, 1998). This proposal was seen as justifiable since the central area was already overcrowded, there was a recognised need to preserve the remaining historic features and the southern edge was regarded as a better location in geographic and environmental terms. However, this decision was questionable because the new CBD was neither in the centre of the city nor in the centre of the planned conurbation (see Fig. 4). With the new international airport to the far north, communication and transportation links to the CBD are likely to be a problem.

Economic development in the city was to be accompanied by population expansion. In contrast to previous plans population increase was to be strictly controlled in the central city with growth directed to the satellite towns. Population and the land use projections are shown in Table 1.

The plan proposed additional policies for historic protection and conservation. These covered many important sites in the region which had not previously been well protected. In the old town, apart from consolidating the arrangements made during the 1980s, more attention was paid to the control of building height and density, particularly inside the Wall. A major study of the Walled Town was carried out in 1989 by the Planning Bureau. Different building-height zones were proposed to preserve the historic skyline. Building height was allowed to
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Table 1 Population and land use plan in Xi’an: 2000–2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2000 Population (000s)</th>
<th>Land use (km²)</th>
<th>2010 Population (000s)</th>
<th>Land use (km²)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,650</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>3,100</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central city</td>
<td>2,089</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>2,145</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peripheral towns</td>
<td>561</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>935</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Management Bureau and Xi’an Municipal Urban Planning and Design Institute, 1998, 64.

increase gradually from the Wall itself and from other landmark buildings. New housing or other buildings in traditional style were planned in a few areas around the major gates and the Bell and Drum Towers. These policies were adopted by the new overall plan. Building height was controlled at nine to 24 metres in most areas, with a maximum of 36 metres in other areas. However, by the first half of the 1990s development had already made significant changes to the historic landscape. Many high-rise buildings have been inserted within the built-up areas and some of them have been poorly designed. In 1995, due to pressure from property developers, a decision was taken to allow buildings of 50 metres in some areas of the old town. The new plan shifted away from preservation of the entire old town and toward a policy of protecting a few areas including several visual corridors running mainly from the central cross to the four gates and from each of the major historic buildings.

This area-based approach has resulted in partial success. The two high-profile areas, the new central square between the Bell Tower and the Drum Tower and the Square outside the main South Gate, were opened before the World Historic Cities Mayors’ conference held in the city in 1996. In order to restore some of the historic features the new plan proposed to develop a few streets following the Tang dynasty Changan Cheng and to restore the Western Market in Tang style on the old airport site in the western suburb. Recently more attention has been given to other important historic sites in the region, including the ruins of Han Changan City which are located in the north-west suburb. This site, which covers an area of 36 square kilometres of rural land with about 20,000 rural residents, has been on the national list since the 1950s. To date there have been no major developments on the site apart from farming activities. With the loss of most historic features in the Ming City, planners in Xi’an would like this site to be preserved (Gui, 1997). This poses no difficulties because of the site’s scientific and archaeological value and the protection granted by central government. However, the preservation of the Han Changan City site is unlikely to have favourable implications for the development of tourism.

Conclusion

Xi’an City has experienced a great many changes since the Communists came to power in 1949. It has developed from a small traditional town of 380,000 people
covering an area of 14 square kilometres of land into one of the most important industrial, commercial, administrative and cultural centres in inland China. At the end of 1996 Xi’an had a built-up area of 150 square kilometres with a total population of 3 million excluding the rural counties under its administration (State Statistics Bureau, 1998). City planning has played a very important role in this dramatic expansion despite being marginalised from time to time as a result of shifts in national policies. Planning was particularly successful in defining the functional zones of the city and managing large publicly funded projects such as public works, roads and other infrastructure during the period of increased investment.

However, with regard to protection of the historic landscape the case study has revealed many shortcomings. There were important gaps between the original planning objectives and eventual achievement. After nearly 50 years of expansion and development the historic town itself has changed dramatically. Many of the city’s historical features and townscape have disappeared. In many respects Xi’an is no longer a historic town. What remain are a number of historic sites and buildings scattered among modern structures. The skyline of the city has become dominated by modern tourist hotels, offices and shopping blocks rather than ancient towers or pagodas. Unless a visitor stands near the City Wall or one of the main historic buildings it is difficult to imagine that this was once a great ancient city. The ongoing urban renewal process will further reduce the historic fabric, particularly in relation to the old houses located inside the City Wall.

The main reasons for the erosion of the historic landscape were as follows. Since 1949 protection of historic interests had been a major concern of central government but there was no specific legislation in this area prior to 1980. Only informal instructions were given by central government through circulars or leaders’ speeches. These instructions focused on protecting individual buildings and structures of national importance through formal listing procedures. Little attention was given to the preservation of the environmental surroundings of important buildings and the historic urban landscape as a whole. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) protection of historic interests was viewed as reactionary; many listed buildings were neglected or damaged. Uncontrolled adaptation to the older housing stock altered the spatial pattern of traditional courtyard-style houses. From 1980 more comprehensive protection measures were introduced but they came too late to forestall the effects of economic development and modernisation.

Economic development was responsible for the loss of many historic features in Chinese cities. In the early 1950s industrialisation was the key word in urban planning. Expansion of manufacturing and other industrial activities was planned in towns and cities throughout the country. In Xi’an several industrial districts were added to the historic infrastructure within a decade. Some of these factories were relocated from the industrial cities of the coastal areas, such as Shanghai, for defence purposes. These industrial developments shifted the balance of land use in Xi’an from consumption and commercial activities to production. In relation to economic objectives, protection of historic interests
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was a lower-priority issue. Although the new industrial districts were planned away from the town centre, many of the supporting facilities relied on existing structures including housing. Low investment in consumption facilities resulted in the declining quality and condition of the historic fabric. Economic reform and the opening up of the urban land market for commercial property development has subsequently reshaped the historic cities in different ways. Development activities became concentrated on the central areas. The higher land values of the central area attracted major investment for urban renewal which resulted in the demolition of the majority of traditional houses.

The destruction of the historic built environment was not entirely the fault of market forces. A key factor was also the perceptions and ideas of local politicians and planners. Old houses were seen as symbols of backwardness and poverty which had no place in a ‘modern city’. In many people’s eyes, multi-storey, colourful modern buildings were regarded as preferable to the traditional structures. Official attitudes were enforced by the widespread popular demand for the improvement of living conditions.

The master-plan approach which focused on large-scale economic development, provision of public facilities and defined functional zones became increasingly unable to cope with the management of incremental change within the historic conservation areas. Under the new economic situation the implementation of planning policies relies heavily upon the contributions of property developers. The short-term agenda of attracting inward investment often outweighs the established planning and control policies. The relaxation of controls on building height in the old town served as one of the best examples of this. The limits on building height were adjusted from time to time in order to accommodate the demands of the property developers. Implementation of the Master Plan was also influenced by shifts in national political and economic objectives: when the national government called for industrialisation, historic towns were pressured to become industrial centres; when the government decided to promote business and trade, historic towns were required to adapt to the emerging market system.

A further reason for the disappearance of historic urban landscape has been the pressures from expansion of major administrative centres. Xi’an has served as the provincial capital since 1949. During the early years the city also served as the administrative centre in the north-west region of the country. In addition the city has its own municipal government which is responsible for the built-up area, as well as the surrounding six rural counties. These government bodies all have offices in the city, most of which are concentrated in the central area.

The experience of Xi’an is not unique in China. The ‘modernisation’ drive and the emerging land market have affected most of the major historic cities including Beijing, the national capital. Provision of high-rise tower blocks, overhead urban roads and bridges, car parks and underground systems will have irreversible effects on the historic urban landscape. Many Chinese planners and officials have begun to question the wisdom of this approach. If this process continues many historic Chinese cities will lose their uniqueness (Wu, 1998). If Xi’an city had been preserved as it was in 1949 with some upgrading it would
very likely be seen as a major achievement in urban conservation, of significant historic value to the nation and a much more attractive destination for tourists. Regrettably this opportunity has now been lost. The local authority recently applied to UNESCO for World Heritage status to be conferred on the Walled Old Town, but after due consideration the application was rejected. The case study of Xi'an has shown that some of the carlic mistakes made by Western planners in implementing urban renewal were repeated in Chinese cities in the 1990s. Although it is impossible to restore the historic landscape in Xi’an, the lessons are important for the protection of many small historic towns and villages in China which have remained undisturbed to date.

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