



VIEWPOINTS

Discussion of topical issues
in urban morphology

From Alnwick to China: M. R. G. Conzen's classic study in Chinese

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A half-century after its publication, M. R. G. Conzen's classic study *Alnwick Northumberland: a study in town-plan analysis* (1960) has been translated into Chinese (Song *et al.*, 2011). This follows a number of studies in recent years exploring the applicability of Conzenian methods in China (Chen, 2008; Whitehand and Gu, 2007; Whitehand *et al.*, 2011a, 2011b). It is testimony to the significance of these methods far beyond the European towns and cities to which they were originally applied (Conzen, 2004).

The study of Alnwick is in some ways an embodiment of two aspects of Conzen's early experience: his training as a cultural geographer in Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s and his service as a practising planner in England in the late 1930s. Focusing on the physical structure of urban space, Conzen applied his historico-geographical perspective to deciphering the accumulations of forms produced by many generations of builders, planners and ordinary people. But his approach lacked resonance in China until recently. As early as the 1960s copies of *Alnwick* were available in China, and in the 1980s several related publications (Conzen, 1981; Whitehand, 1987) became available to Chinese researchers. However, before the formal introduction of Conzenian urban morphology in Chinese publications (Gu, 2001), the Conzenian school received little attention in China judging by citations in journals and searches in CNKI (Chinese

National Knowledge Infrastructure, www.cnki.net), the authoritative database of academic journals in China.

Until the 1980s there was little systematic research in historical urban geography in China (Whitehand and Gu, 2006). Key-word searches (for example, for 'urban landscape' and 'townscape') in CNKI from 1911 to the present, yield only one paper in geographical journals before 2000 and eight after. There are more papers in journals of architecture and urban planning. The gap between the research-based geographical discipline and practice-oriented architecture and urban planning is greater in China than in the West.

The growth of interest in the Conzenian school has been particularly evident since 2001, mostly within architecture and urban planning. This may well reflect concern among architects and planners about the loss of the identity of Chinese cities. This concern was awakened by the widespread destruction of historical features during the Cultural Revolution, and led to the enactment of various planning laws and the publication of a List of Precious Chinese Historical Cities since the 1980s (Whitehand and Gu, 2006). However, historical areas in many cities are undergoing redevelopment or so called 'regeneration' even if they appear on the List of Precious Historical Cities: a situation much more serious than that to which Conzen (1981) drew attention in Britain.

Against this background, Conzen's stress on the

educational and intellectual value of the urban landscape as an 'objectivation of the spirit' of the succession of societies that inhabits it (Whitehand and Gu, 2007) is fundamental. Unfortunately in China this perspective has hitherto been slow to take hold in the face of economic priorities – in the case of historical cities, particularly priorities related to tourism. A historico-geographical perspective is needed which emphasizes sequences and periodicities in historical development (Whitehand, 1994), based on a sound framework of philosophy and methodology (Larkham and Morton, 2011; Whitehand *et al.*, 2011b). Thus the historico-geographical methods elaborated by Conzen in the Chinese translation of *Alnwick* are especially welcome.

Chinese readers will be attracted by the book's integrated cartographic expression. They will also be impressed by the remarkable range of research resources available in the small town of Alnwick. Associated with political and cosmological beliefs, Chinese ancient city maps are artistic and symbolic. They contain very limited planimetric information (Whitehand and Gu, 2006). For most cities there were no accurate maps until the twentieth century. Also there are few historical tax and court records, and little cadastral and rental information, mainly due to political upheavals. The availability of *Alnwick* in Chinese may spur local scholars to make progress in two respects: first, the exploration of approaches to tracing earlier townscapes using limited historical data, such as focusing on extant features in the ground plan; secondly, creating a climate in which the authorities show greater willingness to make available to researchers those sources of information that do exist.

The conceptualization of the townscape and theory building are exceptional features of *Alnwick*. Conzen achieved this by articulating Alnwick's historical trajectory. The concepts he developed should be congenial to Chinese researchers working in various disciplines. They provide the basis for comparative research across different culture areas. Some, such as fixation lines, morphological frames, and fringe belts, have a clear resonance in China. Hundreds of Chinese cities have, or have had, walls and moats. As demonstrated by Whitehand (1994, 2009), fringe belts have been shaped not only by fixation lines such as city walls and natural barriers, but also by the uneven nature of urban growth, particularly related to economic cycles. Many political-economic periods in China have similarly left their footprints. Fringe-belt theory also connects urban amenity to development cycles (Conzen, 2009). Fringe belts provide both

ecological and heritage benefits that need to receive attention in China.

In *Alnwick*, Conzen explored the relationship between urban form and the agents of change operating in various periods, and this was subsequently developed further by himself and the Conzenian school (Whitehand, 1988). During recent Chinese history there have emerged various agents and forces characteristic of particular periods. In the 1950s, a traditional tenure system was replaced by state or collective ownership, and over several decades *danweis* (work units) became characteristic. The morphological aspects of these changes are still to be fully investigated in China in a way that builds on Conzen's investigations in England.

Painstaking descriptive and analytical work is a striking aspect of Conzen's study of Alnwick and such an approach is essential if the morphological characteristics of different periods are to be understood and if urban design is to mature in China (Moudon, 1992). Furthermore, both indigenous and imported planning theories have left footprints in Chinese city form that can be explicated using Conzen's methods.

To sum up, the translation of *Alnwick* will provide Chinese scholars with a platform from which to comprehend and communicate with the Conzenian school. In the era of the Internet, Historical GIS and WebGIS, Koster (2006) has indicated technical developments that can build on the sort of data that Conzen has provided for Alnwick. These developments can both further extend the life of his classic study, and bring to light new knowledge (Hillier, 2010). Conzen has set in train a range of developments that he could scarcely have imagined when he was working half a century ago.

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Urban morphology in higher education

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Urban morphology is an interdisciplinary field. This key characteristic has both advantages and disadvantages. One of the disadvantages is the difficulty of providing a sound urban morphological education. There is a lack of degree courses in urban morphology. Furthermore, where urban morphology appears within degree courses in other disciplines its role tends to be minor. While many reviews of urban morphological research have been produced over the years, systematic reviews of urban morphological education have been few (for some notable exceptions see Moudon, 1995, and Larkham, 2001, 2003). It may therefore be of interest to describe recent developments in Portugal.

Higher education institutions in Portugal are structured according to four different groups: public institutions (including universities and polytechnics), private institutions (including universities and polytechnics), concordat/religious institutions, and

military/police institutions. In total, the four groups include 135 institutions. A recent review involved an analysis of all these institutions mainly based on their curricula.

The first stage was the identification of the curricula that effectively incorporate the study of urban form. It was found that the study of urban form is being promoted in ten Portuguese institutions. These include public and private universities, but not polytechnics. Urban morphology seems to be more integrated within public universities' curricula. As expected, this integration is confined to faculties and departments of architecture, geography, planning and engineering (in this order of importance).

Eight of the fifteen public universities in the country have courses that include the study of urban form. Three factors underlie these findings. The first is the geographical location of universities. Universities along the Portuguese coastline