SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADITIONAL URBAN FORM IN SOUTHEAST CHINA

This paper aims at giving tangible meaning to the concept of traditional Chinese urban form, to begin to dispel the vagueness that has hampered efforts by Chinese (and other) architects and urban designers to draw lessons from Chinese urban tradition. It describes the formal structures of the pre-industrial cities of Southeast China, including Nanjing, Suzhou, Hangzhou and Shanghai as examples, and it formulates seven characteristics of Chinese traditional cities: the influence of an orthogonal model, the absence of the "square," the prevalence of the walled residential street, the definition of two city centers, the establishment of the canal system, the dominance of low buildings and evenly distributed small open spaces, and the use of tower and topography to generate town identity.

Since the cities of Southeast China represented the final stage in the development of urban areas in pre-industrial China, the paper can claim to be a general study of traditional Chinese urban form. The determination of seven characteristics was not based on any property of the number seven; the author imagines that additional formal characteristics (with similar value and significance) may be discovered by other authors. The characteristics have been defined in contrast to features of the European medieval and Renaissance city, because most architects and urban designers are acquainted with this system. After presenting each characteristic, the paper explores its social, economic and cultural implications. The paper concludes by noting five traditional Chinese values embodied in the formal characteristics.

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1978, Chinese architects and urban designers have resumed debate on the possibility of borrowing from China's built heritage to design the environment of today. However, the use of the term "traditional form" in these discussions remains vague. Even though everyone involved seems to bear specific images of an old Chinese village or city in his or her mind, few
have described traditional forms beyond the level of specific detail or scattered impression. This vagueness greatly hampers the ability of architects and urban designers to draw genuine lessons from Chinese urban tradition. An outline of the basic structures of traditional environmental forms in China is very much in need.¹

My investigations have allowed me to formulate seven characteristics of the traditional Chinese urban settlement as it existed in Southeast China. This paper describes these in sequence, and further examines what each meant in traditional Chinese culture, how it came about by providing physical expression to values and beliefs held by members of traditional Chinese society.

"Southeast China," as used in this paper, refers to the plains around the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze and Qiantang Rivers (FIG. 1). Nanjing, Suzhou, Hangzhou and Shanghai are cities in this area. The southeast was the most urbanized region of China before the advent of Chinese industrialization at the beginning of the twentieth century.² The urban settlements studied here also served as local administrative centers, and they often had a city wall, a feature that distinguished a "city" from a "town" in the everyday conception of Chinese people. They represented the final stage in the development of the urban settlement in pre-industrial China. Since most of the examples used in this paper were drawn from this most urbanized region, the paper can be seen as a more general study of traditional Chinese urban form.

Most of the cities of Southeast China were the result of a long evolutionary process that lasted from 400 B.C. through the late nineteenth century. But the main focus of this paper is not historical investigation; it is the study of "tradition" in the everyday world. The urban forms discussed, therefore, are defined as ones we can still experience in real settings. Besides research into relevant literature, this has meant the paper has relied heavily on direct observation of actual places.

To describe things in everyday language is a process that usually involves contrast and comparison; something is "linear," for example, because other things are "non-linear." This paper presents the characteristics of traditional Chinese cities in comparison to characteristics of European pre-industrial cities, especially those of the medieval period. European urban forms are used because most architects and urban designers today, including those in China, are familiar with them. Characteristics common to pre-industrial cities in both the East and the West, such as the city wall and the absence of functional zones, are not discussed due to existing studies on these topics.³

INFLUENCE OF AN ORTHOGONAL MODEL

The general layouts of major Western ancient cities such as Athens and Rome often exhibited a collage of highly individualized volumes and irregular leftover spaces. No overall order could usually be found within a city or between cities. European medieval towns shared a number of common elements, but they presented various combinations of these elements and various ad-hoc creations in the architecture of individual buildings.⁴ To reinforce this variety, Western cities also displayed many non-orthogonal configurations of space such as those produced by am-
phitheaters, oval piazzas, radial streets, and similar features.

In contrast, traditional cities in Southeast China exhibited a certain similarity in general layout. The common model had four features which distinguished it from the curvilinear or oblique patterns of European cities. First was that major circulation routes — streets and canals — tended to form an orthogonal, symmetrical network such as a "+", "T", or "#" grid. Second was that this network was oriented toward the cardinal directions. (The most important street often ran north to south, and building orientation and other treatments suggested that south was the most important side of the city.) The third feature was that the yamen, or administrative center, was often located near the crossing point of the "+" or "T" grid. Finally, buildings were strikingly uniform in their rectangular plan and cardinal orientation. Even though minor streets within each quarter of the city may have appeared "organic," buildings were coordinated to eliminate irregular urban space. This was the case with both private residences and public institutions (FIG. 2).

In shaping a city, the overall orthogonal model had as much influence as other, more local factors such as site, climate, city size and population. The same plan could, in fact, be found in diverse cities in various parts of Southeastern China, including Nanjing, the capital of five former dynasties with a population of nearly 300,000, Shanghai, a county capital, and Nanhui, a small town with several thousand residents (FIG. 3). In some cases, a new town such as Nanhui was built after the model. In others, the model was imposed onto spontaneously developed urban settlements. Cities often had irregular boundaries, but their internal organization usually showed the influence of the orthogonal model. The boundary of Nanjing, for example, was shapeless due to the uneven topography surrounding it. However, from 1366 to 1386 B.C. the first emperor of the Ming dynasty renovated the whole city as his national capital. An internal organization following the model was inserted into the irregular outline, and a lake was filled so that the royal palace could be placed at a central location.5

Agreement in the general layout between various urban settlements was immediately discernable to visitors. Total strangers to a city in Southeast China could sense the orientation and whereabouts of the community’s administra-
It is remarkable that such unity came into being not because of unspoken cultural consensus (as in other traditions), but as the result of a literal model documented in Kao Gong Ji (The Records of Works), a chapter of the Zhou Li (The Rituals of the Zhou Empire). The Zhou Li was compiled by Confucian scholars serving the Han emperors about 150 B.C. It was a written code which specified a set of rules for an idealized Zhou Empire (c. 11c. - 6c. B.C.). The contents of these rules included proper ritual procedures, behavior standards, and the layouts of palaces and cities for different social classes. The diagram in the Zhou Li that placed the palace in the center of a square city with an orthogonal grid honored the emperor’s power with a simple, strong geometrical language. Besides general city layout, the code specified details such as the forms and colors of residences and the width of streets (FIG. 4).6

Later on, this set of rules became the primary criteria for "good" society in Confucian doctrine. This doctrine ardently advocated a centralized monarchy, and became the only enduring official ideology in Chinese history. It reflected the needs of small family farmers, the primary component of traditional Chinese society. Threatened by unpredictable natural and social conditions, these farmers supported a unified, omnipotent system that could protect their fragile agricultural existence.7

In Confucian doctrine, the historical/physical descriptions of the Zhou Li became equivalent to moral rules.8 Arthur Wright has written: "These texts ‘represent the endeavors of the Confucian school to determine what the beliefs and rites should properly be.’ In other words, they are normative and prescriptive, not historical."9 Such a transformation was probably based on an isomorphism in human perception. For example, "square" in Chinese describes both a geometrical figure and a social behavior, the same as in English. It also must be noted that these "holy texts" had little to do with religion as defined in other cultures. Religions have never been accepted by mainstream Chinese traditional culture. As symbols of a secular social order, these rules did not deeply involve supernatural beliefs as did fengshui.10

Since emperors of every succeeding dynasty in China tried to present themselves as real, qualified rulers, one of the first and easiest things they could do was make the physical form of their capitals as similar to the ideal model in the Zhou Li as possible. New cities always tended to be more faithful to the ancient model than their antecedents, a fact that indicates how important official ideology was in Chinese history. For the same reason, many copies of dynastic capitals were made at the local government level, a process very like the dissemination of prototypical Roman plans to colonial cities along the Mediterranean coast.

FIG. 4. The model as documented in Kao Gong Ji. Source: Chongyi Nie, Xin Ding San Li Tu (The Illustrated Three Rites, New Edition) (Shanghai, Shanghai Classics Press, 1985 [T 175]).

FIG. 5. The linear public space.
The degree with which the model was adhered to was closely related to the political function of a city. Cities in Southeast China tended to deviate from it more than their northern administrative counterparts, because of their rapid commercial expansion. A conflict existed between the rectangular profile of the model and the irregular urban expansion resulting from trading activities. For example, even though there was plenty of open land in the southeastern corner of rectangular Suzhou, the urban area crowded outside the Chengmen Gate where it had good access to major traffic routes. The orthogonal model, similarly, had little influence in small towns which did not have a county yamen.

The collage plans of ancient Athens and Rome might have reflected these cities' polytheistic religion and political pluralism. And the various organic layouts of European medieval cities symbolized their autonomous status. The uniformed and ordered spatial configurations of Chinese traditional cities worked in a similar way: the model and its wide application successfully reinforced the notion of a centralized political system and a perfect universe.

**ABSENCE OF THE "SQUARE"**

The "square" is a type of space represented in the piazzas and places of European medieval and Renaissance cities. It is a comparatively large open space, architecturally defined, but unenclosed by a single building, and used by the whole city for public gatherings. Such a type of space was not in favor in traditional Chinese cities, especially in Southeast China. In these cities, the public realm took a linear form, that of a commercial street which frequently ran along a canal (FIG. 5).

The experience in the open public space was mostly that of forward or backward motion. "Static" public activities did take place in the city, but in a different pattern. They happened at nodes along the street/canal, such as at the ends of a bridge or in front of a temple. People could stop in these places to bargain with vendors or watch street entertainers. People also met at teahouses and in the courtyards of public institutions such as native-place association halls and popular temples. In some cities, there was as many as one teahouse for every 2,000 - 3,000 square feet of city fabric. We probably can conclude that public gatherings in these settlements rarely occurred at the level of the whole city. Rather, they occurred in scattered small groups, in places strung along major circulation routes and separated from one another. It is no wonder under these circumstances that rumor was often the only way for information to spread.

One may argue that public "squares" did exist in these cities — such as those spaces in front of important public buildings, at the ends of bridges, or near city gates. But these spaces were by nature different from Western squares. Except for the front yards of a few public buildings, their size was insignificant when considered in light of the entire city (FIG. 6). The lack of unifying design elements, such as ground paving or similar treatment of surrounding building facades, reinforced the impression of smallness. More importantly, these open spaces, especially the larger and more well-defined ones, were often not used by the public. For example, commercial activities were prohibited within a certain distance from the front yard of an official building such as a yamen or a Confucius' temple — usually the only two large, planned open spaces in a city.

The predominantly linear nature of public space demanded transverse elements that could create perceptually manageable sections. This probably was the aesthetic motive behind the construction of so many paifangs, or decorative gates. Shanghai in the seventeenth century had 60 paifangs in its 600-acre urban area. The linear pattern was probably caused by the fact that no place was purposefully reserved for "inferior" trading and merchandising activities. Hence, shops and vendors sprawled spontaneously along streets and canals or around

the gates of non-official public buildings such as Buddhist, Taoist or City God temples. Because of their non-official status, these public buildings had smaller spaces in front of them than government buildings. Therefore, the open public spaces of the traditional city tended to be linear, with some sections expanded into small nodes.

The neglect of markets had much to do with the structure of Chinese traditional society. The social hierarchy of imperial China was mainly based on bureaucratic position. A person’s economic status was only a secondary consideration. The enormous respect for the bureaucracy was vital for the huge empire. Another characteristic of the hierarchy was a scornful, hostile attitude toward merchants, who were frequently placed in one of the lowest classes in government documents.

Though the model plan of the Zhou Li did specify a place for “markets” in the ideal city, these were really not markets in the modern sense — places where farmers could exchange surplus products. As evidenced by the two centralized “East and West Markets” in Changan (582 A.D.), they were really “palace markets” that only served the royal family and the nobles. Even so, the proper location of a “market,” according to the Zhou Li, was to the less favored north side of the palace. Markets used by farmers and artisans did not appear until the tenth century. Spontaneously developed commercial streets were the best and only places for these newcomers, who were unable to find their niche in the ideological plan.

In any pre-industrial society with limited economic means, such as the traditional Chinese city or the European medieval town, maintaining a big piece of open land in the center of a walled enclosure required a cooperative effort supported by all social forces. Such an effort had also to be justified by corresponding need such as the meeting of a large number of people. The square in the European city was used by merchants, the church, the municipal administration, and the general public for political and other gatherings. In China, however, a centralized political system and a segregated society prevented the majority of residents from sharing local power or even a piece of officially designated open space.

PREVALENCE OF THE WALLED RESIDENTIAL STREET

Narrow, winding streets were the rule in both Western medieval towns and traditional urban settlements in Southeast China. However, the relationship between the street and the house was quite different in the two traditions. In European medieval cities, the relationship tended to be between the solid of buildings and the void of street space. Moreover, the interior spaces of a house often opened directly onto the street through doors and windows. Domestic activities easily spilled into the public domain so that city residents of middle and lower classes used the street as their front yards. By way of contrast, streets within the quarters and blocks of a traditional city in Southeast China were more separate from the house, and much quieter (FIG. 7).

Seen from the street, the courtyard house — the standard traditional Chinese residence — presented a bare facade. There was no display of front yard as in English towns. Despite the hot, wet summer, window openings were often reduced to the minimum. The few inevitable windows were either covered by trellises or placed near the top of walls (FIG. 8). Standing in the street, one could see little of the interior of a house. And walking in a residential block, one could find the street just wide enough for pedestrian traffic. Not many activities happened in the street. The only extra space for neighborly gathering (by women only) occurred around a few public wells scattered in a block.

Unlike the Western relation between private interior and public exterior, the traditional Chinese city always contained some form of private open space such as a courtyard between the main room of a house and the street. This meant that walls, not buildings, defined the residential street. Behind the wall there was minimum separation between rooms and private open space. The private open space not only accommodated all the domestic activities of the house compound, it helped build the impression of a small “world.” This impression was reinforced by a pattern
of inhabitation in which the house was occupied by a big family, with as many as three or four generations living together. The living pattern implied an effort to maintain the extended family: grandparents lived in the best part of the house (that which faced south and was farthest from the front entrance if several courtyards were available), while the younger generation lived in the wings of the house or in those parts closer to the entrance. All rooms, courtyards, and gardens, housing young and old, animals, and a small altar, were enclosed within the wall. Such a physical pattern strengthened the image of self-containment (FIG. 9).

This inward pattern relating house to street reflected the need to maintain family privacy and independence and a comparatively lesser interest in community activities involving the urban environment at large. (In rural areas the house might have been more open to outside.) These attitudes might have resulted from the self-contained agricultural economy of traditional China. In this economy, the pressure for exchange of goods and technological innovations was limited. Production could be organized on a family scale. Land, agricultural technology, and other properties were passed from generation to generation within the family. Naturally, the family became the basic unit of the society, and urban residents kept the same behavior, since Chinese cities were closely tied to the countryside. Respect for family encouraged the worship of other types of kinship in urban settlements. This was evidenced by the numerous native-place association halls, a unique building type in the traditional cities of Southeast China.

DEFINITION OF TWO CITY CENTERS

European medieval towns often had two major public open spaces, the market/city-hall square and the parvis. One author has written, "... the parvis was never intended to compete with the market square." In fact, both spaces were used daily by all city residents, and even though the two had different functions, they worked together to serve the public. This relationship was often revealed by a physical connection between the two spaces creating a two-part nucleus. In this sense we probably can say that a European medieval city, especially after being granted a charter, had only one central place which acted as the hub of political, commercial and religious activity.

Traditional cities in Southeast China had two centers, one administrative and one civic. These were not only spatially separate but functionally distinct in the everyday life of the average resident of the city (FIG. 10). The local yamen constituted the administrative center, and as stated previously, was often placed near the geometric center of the city. It included the governor’s residence and office, governmental storage, and sometimes a military camp, and there often was some open space before its front entrance (FIG. 11). In traditional orthodox belief, the yamen was the only center of a city. Yamens, not markets, were always the most boldly marked places on city maps. (One can perhaps draw a comparison between this and the official titles of..."
traditional Chinese nobles, which were the last identifying descriptions to be omitted from biographies.) Commoners lacked access to the yamen compound, however, and the law even prohibited public activities near a yamen. This central place appeared remote and symbolic to average residents, even though it was the seat of real power in the city. Its image was similar to that of the castle in the early Western medieval city.

By way of contrast, the civic center was often a combination of commercial streets and a few public buildings. Examples include the area of Guanqian Street in Suzhou, the City God Temple area of Shanghai, and the Fuzimiao area of Nanjian (FIG. 12). Unlike the exclusive and unfunctional yamen, the civic center was the concrete urban nucleus of people’s everyday lives, and was characterized by a holistic orientation toward people’s environmental requirements.

Lined mostly by two-story shops, the 10-15 foot wide stone-paved streets of the civic center provided a good scale for pedestrians. Canopies along the street edge protected people from rain and hot summer sun (FIG. 13). If a shop, such as a hotel or teahouse, had areas with different levels of privacy, the more exclusive areas would be placed in a back building behind a courtyard. This pattern created many voids behind the facades of the street, where courtyards and back buildings functioned as semi-private retreats to relieve the psychological pressure of the linear public space. Since a canal often ran parallel to the street, the street was absolutely reserved for pedestrian use. In some cases, the canal and the street were separated by a row of shops, enabling stores to use the canal as a supply route and creating many visually delightful waterfront teahouses and restaurants. In other cases, the canal was located immediately adjacent to the street, and was often extended to the

FIG. 10. The two city centers.


water’s edge where benches would be placed for people to sit on while talking, enjoying tea and refreshments from stores across the street, and watching boats on the canal (FIG. 14). Normally, these two types of characteristic relationship between canal and street alternated along one waterfront to form fascinating variations.

The public building, often a temple of popular religion, was always the anchor and identity of the civic center. A temple was not only a spiritual shrine but a meeting place, a hotel, a museum, and a theater. Vendors and street entertainers gathered around its front yard, which was connected to the street by several bridges. Amazingly, the temple relied on only a few simple spatial devices — wall and gate — to separate the sacred from the profane. Spiritual barriers seemed to play an important role. A temple sometimes had a garden which actually functioned as a city park. Canals and garden introduced natural elements into the middle of the commercial area which made the civic center a truly versatile space (FIG. 15).

The schism in the nature of the central urban space in traditional cities of Southeast China reflected two distinct roles that cities played, that of the representative seat of the central monarchy and that of a commercial/service hub for the local economy. Alienation between political operation and other activities resulted in the two-center spatial structure. Immediately before the industrialization of China, however, another type of civic center emerged, this one located at the end of major transportation routes just outside the city wall. Unlike the inner city center, this new commercial hub was more related to land- and labor-intensive crafts, financing, and wholesaling. Its presence had further impacts on the ideological plan.\(^{19}\)

It should be noted that the word “holistic” has often been used too vaguely. In this paper it signifies the result of a process by which people modify their environment bit by bit according to the feeling of their bodies and minds rather than “scientific” instrumentation. After a long period, a harmonious environment was usually achieved by this process in Southeast China. The process can also be seen in pre-industrial cities of other cultures. If any legitimate announcement could be found in Chinese culture relating to this process, it would have been found in traditional philosophy. Such a way of thinking never adopted analytical methods favored by such Western traditions as French Encyclopedism. Traditional Chinese people tended to view the world in a perceptual and intuitive way. The network of canals, for example, was thought of as “the arteries and veins of the human body,” where any choke point “will cause diseases in the nature and human society.\(^{20}\)

**Establishment of the Canal System**

Due to its rainy climate and mostly flat topography, Southeast China has developed a densely spaced canal system for agricultural purposes. Urban settlements also depended on canals, however in the cities the canal system really served as a multi-functional infrastructure. The canal system served first as a water supply. Wells were only used where water from the canals was undrinkable. Second, the canal system provided drainage (although human waste was deposited in tanks and taken away by boats for use as fertilizer.) Third, the canal system served as a network for long-distance, heavy-load transportation. Using a boat with a scull, one farmer could bring 3-5 tons of goods into the city. Fourth, since wood and straw, the major fuels of urban residents, were brought in by boats, the system also could be seen as an energy supply system. Fifth, water from the...
canals was used for fire-fighting. Finally, the network of canals offered major wind channels that improved the microclimate and provided visual corridors. The top of a bridge often offered great, exciting vistas, which could otherwise be scarce in the crowded city. The canal system had the added benefit of being relatively inexpensive to construct and maintain when compared with other approaches such as underground ducts. Overall, the canal system was a highly efficient, multi-functional municipal project.

Because of its well developed canal system, Suzhou has frequently been called "The Venice of the East." Although these two cities do bear some formal resemblance, the motives behind similar physical attributes were quite different. Venice began as a group of separate islands. The Venetians then narrowed the channels by landfills and buildings on piles so that the physical form of the city today expresses an attitude of confrontation and struggle with nature in the interest of maximum material benefit. Unlike the more friendly relationship between the commercial street and the canal in Southeast China, Venetians placed their piazzas and pedestrian streets inside the block, separated from the canals by thick layers of building. Venetian canals also had very little effect on the pattern of piazzas and streets, which was not much different from the pattern of public space in the cities of the mainland (FIG. 16)\textsuperscript{21} The canal systems of cities in Southeast China resulted from the extension and modification of existing networks of rivers. The objective was to maintain a comfortable living environment for a society with limited resources and technology, and with a limited desire for commercial exploitation.

This attitude can be seen as the result of two factors that were frequently stated in government public works documents. The first had to do with the existence of two values in traditional Chinese culture: maintaining harmony with nature and maintaining a frugal lifestyle. One could find the roots of these values in the limited resources and technology available to the society. The second factor was that these cities basically lived on themselves. No slave labor was available. The great civic projects of the Roman Empire depended on free man-power. The cities of Southeast China had to rely heavily on local funds for civic projects such as the excavation and dredging of canals, even though the cities contributed huge sums in taxes to the central government. The construction of Shanghai's city wall was accomplished through the donation of land, money and labor by local residents and gentry.\textsuperscript{22}

DOMINANCE OF LOW BUILDINGS AND EVENLY DISTRIBUTED SMALL OPEN SPACES

Viewing one of the cities of Southeast China from the air, one would have seen many "shallow hollows" spreading over the built area. These were courtyards, gardens, small open areas near public wells and bridges, and other forms of open space. These spaces were "shallow" because most of the buildings around them were only one or two stories high. Since the dimension of the building mass between courtyards rarely exceeded 25-30 feet, "shallow hollows" were distributed evenly throughout the city (FIG. 17). On the one hand, Chinese traditional cities did not have the exciting spatial dramas we are used to in the piazzas and squares of European cities. On the other hand, every house in an old Chinese town, regardless of its owner's financial or social status, enjoyed a piece of private open space. The city as a whole was canopied under trees rising out of these small open areas. Since the city was organized by a south-oriented grid, these "shallow hollows" also enabled each house to take full advantage of the sunshine in winter and the prevailing winds in summer. (The deep eaves of Chinese traditional architecture sheltered the house from the sun in the summer.)

In contrast, after late medieval times, European towns exhibited a different pattern of open space and building height. Houses were closely built to a height of at least three to four stories, and open space was scarce in the private domain. Even in the early Middle Ages, when towns "still show gardens and orchards in the heart of the community," the solid building mass and void garden spaces were not integrated. Garden spaces were often consolidated into a large piece in the center of each block (FIG. 18).

One could see this phenomenon as a reflection of the difference of view toward the relationship between man and nature in the East and the West. While European culture held a more black and white attitude toward the relationship between built and natural environments, the Chinese tradition ground the two kinds of space into smaller pieces and blended them together to create a more holistic environment. This environment suited human living well, and was very efficient in making use of existing natural conditions.

TOWER AND TOPOGRAPHY AS CREATORS OF TOWN IDENTITY

Every medieval or Renaissance town in the West was distinct in form. This individuality not only came from its individualized layout but from the unique appearances of its church, town hall, castle and city gate. A great diversity of individual houses and towers, built by powerful families, added more color to the townscape. This diversity reflected the autonomous status of the city-state and the economic power of its citizens.

It was a different scene in Southeast China. Following the Zhou Li and other Confucian doctrines, the central government of many dynasties made laws specifying the dimensions, heights, materials, decorations, and even colors of buildings. These laws aimed at creating an environmental hierarchy from government buildings, to temples, residences of officials, and common people's houses. According to the regulations of the Ming dynasty, the color yellow was exclusively reserved for buildings used by the royal
family. Only governmental buildings and temples could use dougong, the decorative element under the eaves. And a person without a position in the government was prohibited from building a house bigger than three jian or higher than five jia.24 He was also not permitted to use more than a couple of specified colors.25

Consequently, most man-made parts of a city in this region comprised a sea of one or two-story buildings with black clay tile roofs, white stucco walls, wood windows, and brown painted doors. Even though public buildings had larger volumes and were more highly decorated, these mainly horizontal variations were not strong enough to create a three-dimensional scene. Surrounded by such a homogeneous environment, one figure easily became the focus of the entire townscape: the high-rise temple tower. The temple tower was the only building type in traditional Chinese architecture that rose to seven or eight stories. Because the number of such towers was limited—often one or two for an average city—their slim silhouettes acted as eye-catching orientation devices. In some cities people deliberately organized the tower into a vista.

The whole composition presented a highly controlled image, achieved by strict implementation of an environmental hierarchy. Inevitably, the identity of each traditional city in Southeast China could only be created with limited means: the overall topography and the number and location of temple towers (FIG. 19).

**CONCLUSION: FIVE TRADITIONAL VALUES**

The physical settlement forms in Southeast China revealed the social and cultural motives of the society as a whole. On the basis of this study, one may infer five major values or beliefs that played an important role in shaping these settlements: honoring the centralized monarchy, maintaining the social hierarchy, strengthening the importance of family and kinship, creating a holistic environment, and making full use of natural opportunities.

Readers will observe that each of the seven physical characteristics described in this paper involves more than one of these. It is the seven formal features as a whole that embody the five values. Seven is not a magical number. More formal characteristics of traditional Chinese cities may be discovered and formulated that have similar significance for the definition of this settlement type. Finally, one cannot genuinely know what a traditional Chinese city is through formulas alone. One must share the total cultural background of traditional Chinese people to fully understand the subject. We can never “spell out” the most fundamental but pervasive aspects of these phenomena.26


**FIG. 18.** (bottom) The low building and evenly distributed small open spaces.
This paper aims at just such a structural portrait of one traditional settlement type, the cities of Southeast China.


3. For an example, see Gideon Sjoberg, Preindustrial City (New York: The Free Press, 1956).


6. Chongyi Nie, Xin Ding San Li Tu (The Illustrated Three Rites, New Edition) (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Press, 1985 [1175]) vol. 4; Department of City Planning, Tongji University, Zhong Guo Cheng Shi Jian She Shi, p. 8.


10. Suming Liang, Zhong Guo Wen Hua Yao Yi (The Essence of Chinese Culture) (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Jichen Publish Co., 1963), ch. 6.


18. Zucker, Town and Square, p. 80.


22. Zuan Zheng, "The Old Shanghai City.


24. One jian equals approximately nine feet; one jia equals approximately six feet.
