

The cultural geography of Cultural geography Xu Lizheng, "Cultural Landscape, Heritage and Tourism in Beijing"

Master's Thesis in Tourism, Territory and Heritage, supervised by Professor João Luís Jesus Fernandes, presented to the Department of Geography and Tourism of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Coimbra

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Xu Lizheng wrote – and Professor João Luís Fernandes supervised – a very interesting work on the subject that is the title of this brief review note: the cultural landscape as a progressive integrating concept of heritage policy in Beijing, capital of People's Republic of China. The important questions raised there stimulated me to write a few lines about that work, taking it above all in its 'exemplary' configuration, i.e., in the way in which it can illuminate the epistemology of cultural geography and, especially, in the way in which it is configured as an inescapable 'cultural geography of Cultural geography'. Some textual peculiarities certainly have their origin in the triple transfer of meaning present there – thought in the candidate's language, translated into English, here interpreted by a Portuguese reader –, and the limitations of some of the graphic elements can be quickly resolved. None of this, of course, calls into question the author's structured thinking on the topic on which she lectures.

As we have recently seen in relation to China's position on the serious geopolitical issues that have gained prominence in recent years, the political discourse of the Asian superpower persistently emphasizes the notion of culturally differentiated values in different parts of the world. This positioning is also reflected in the theoretical framework of Xu Lizheng's work and this theoretical discussion is indeed one of the main attractions of her dissertation: especially the way in which the different levels of heritage governance in China unfold in concrete political actions at different scales: global, regional and local.

Landscape – The work is divided into the canonical sections of a research work, with its review of the literature on the subject, addressing not only the generic question of characterizing the concept of 'cultural landscape', but also its integration as a central element of the heritage and special

identification of its historical urban aspect. Although firm, this is not the most profound part of the work: not many authors are invited and there is a lack of problematisation around the social tension in the landscape (for Cosgrove, fundamental) – but Xu Lizheng is an optimistic supporter of the harmonious vision and of the traditional or the expression of the landscape. Of course, a master's thesis does not require an extensive problematisation of the issue, nor is that the main objective of the author, but we would like to receive more information about the consolidation of this conceptual nucleus, so rich and so important in the development of cultural geography. In her 'Literature review' (Lizheng, 2022, pp. 4-29) the author presents a careful review of several interrelated topics, especially the 'cultural landscape' concept, but also its importance for heritage management, the special focus on historic urban heritage, and the relationship enacted by – not always free of some conflict – Chinese authorities with international conventions, especially since Florence 2012. The author not only does not fail to recognize the complexity of the interaction between human society and nature over time but also addresses the social, cultural, economic and environmental conditions of its conceptual elaboration. When proceeding to the categorisation of cultural landscapes (Lizheng, 2022, pp. 6-10) and multiple perspectives on landscape (Lizheng, 2022, pp.10-11), the author stresses the plurality of historic landscapes, those that have significant historical value due to great antiquity of urbanisation in China. Nevertheless, it is very pertinent the way gardens or parks are integrated in urban heritage, and the way they reflect the cultural practices and traditions of elite's and commoners' community. Perhaps the most crucial topic of the first part of the Xu Lizheng's dissertation might be the discussion around Florence declaration (Lizheng, 2022, 15-29), and the cultural (regional)

ambiguity of the eventual 'consensus' of the vision of landscape as social, cultural and ecological significance – and, therefore, of the related politics of management among various stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and local communities. Of course the move from the monument to the people, that is behind Unesco's proposal, depends not only on the concept of 'monument' but also on the concept of 'people' – and here lies the overlapping margin of different meaning among the diverse countries and 'civilisational regions' of the world. It is no longer a matter of 'threat and risk' that landscapes may be facing, but of the definition of landscape in itself; it is not only a matter of the relationship between man and environment, but also of 'public interest'.

Heritage and tourism – The author dedicates a section to the characterization of the modalities of preservation of cultural landscapes over time in China and Beijing; and another to the different heritage expressions of Beijing's cultural heritage as well as the expression of its economic and tourist exploitation. In the first of these two sections – 'The history of the preservation of cultural landscapes in China and Beijing' – the author provides her readers with a differentiated view of heritage protection under the different political regimes that China has known. It is a very interesting chapter for those who, like us, immersed in the Western vision of power and its history (and not always exempt from cultural Westernism), can have access to different ways of solving similar problems. In addition to the historical characterisation of the heritage policy in China, in general, and in Beijing in particular, what perhaps interests the reader most is the embedding of this same policy in the unique context that results from the founding of the People's Republic of China, and, especially, the recent formulation that accompanies the country's opening to international tourism in the last two decades. Particularly significant, in relation to the first case, is the evolutionist and collectivist valuation of heritage – with important differences compared to the liberal democracies of the West, more elitist and traditionalist; and, in relation to the second case, the progressive integration of the 'tourist' (domestic or foreign) in the conceptual and practical dimension of heritage management. When applied to Beijing, these renewed conceptions and practices of heritage refer to: clarifying of citywide protection, establishment of a conservation governance, promotion of restoration of key cultural relics,

incorporation of 'responsible person', and the affirmation of use rather than protection.

The second of those two sections – 'Beijing's tourism resources and cultural heritage' – is a stimulating journey through the world of Chinese culture and especially of Beijing, reviving the ancient cultural and historical casts of the regions of the world that was undoubtedly one of the main stimuli of the Geography. (The comparative analysis between the Chinese operatic tradition and Portuguese fado, even if both are expressions of urban cultural traditions, does not seem fairly justifiable). The reader gets easily dazzled by the subchapters dedicated to 'Central axis of Beijing' (Lizheng, 2022, pp. 44-50) and 'Beijing's Forbidden City' (Lizheng, 2022, pp. 57-65), but it is not impossible that some favor of exoticism has obscured the proper scientific analysis of the text. This is also due to the author's writing style, which is very careful, even if it contains some 'melodic links' that can naturally come from the reading by a Portuguese translation into English of the nuances of the phrase thought in the author's original language! It is a pity that the author does not accompany the text with the appropriate bibliographic references that would allow the readers to progress in the deepening of the theme if they wished to do so.

Geography – Finally, it presents the assumptions, paths and results of a spatial analysis of the differential distribution of tourism in the Beijing metropolitan area, as well as a predictive analysis of the general lines of its future behavior (Lizheng, 2022, p. 73-86). The author applies a specific method ('standard deviation ellipse') to a peculiar source of information (geolocalized photographs from a popular social network), which, calibrated by official statistical information, allows her to monitor not only the trend of spatial evolution of the behavior of tourists in the metropolitan area of Beijing, but also, what should be considered the most important, detecting a growing tendency among tourists to associate the enjoyment of cultural landscapes – even the suburban ones, and especially those that contain a significant incorporation of ecological balance – the traditional visit to the most exuberant material 'relics' of the past.

In conclusion, we cannot fail to mention what is one of the most stimulating contributions of this study by Xu Lizheng, and which justifies the title of this review. It raises questions and suggests, at

various scales, paths of investigation similar to those that the author brought to this study. There is an urgent need for a 'cultural geography of cultural geography', in all areas and scales that our discipline encompasses and contemplates.

A favorite author of mine, Hans G. Gadamer, taught us to respect method as much as truth. His hermeneutic manoeuvre — and the correlative fusion of horizons — seems to me to be adequate to conclude this brief review note. Reading Xu Lizheng's work not only triggers a specifically cultural estrangement, but also induces the need to overcome the distance of apparent incommunicability that is drawn between

the 'western' and 'eastern' margins of heritage and landscape discourses and policies: not by the mixture of characteristics common to the various sides, but by the necessary expansion of each one of them, considered individually and in the relationship established with any other.

The arrival of students from different places and cultures to our universities will not only open up new ways of thinking and updating of foreign languages's bibliographies, but also — and perhaps this is the most important thing — will force us to rethink our own positioning and the unidirectional universality of knowledge.

