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Open Call for Participation

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Research Network on Urban Ruins in Contemporary China

当代中国城市废墟的研究网络

This concept note aims to build an international research group of scholars, artists, and urban explorers focusing on ruins and ruination processes in urban China.

Urban ruins constitute a ubiquitous architectural feature in contemporary China: from the rubble of urban demolition operations to the empty newly-built ghost towns, from industrial wastelands to forgotten historical buildings falling in disrepair, from abandoned theme parks to the slow decline of villages emptying as younger generations move to cities. The familiar strangeness of such ruined landscapes deserves a more thorough study. They operate a critical understanding of urban development by highlighting economic, ecological, and social crises.



Figure 1 The abandoned Beijing Amusement Park, September 2015 (J. Audin)

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- ***Theme 1: Ruination processes in contemporary China***

Ruins are in close connection with time and temporality (Augé 2003; Garrett 2011). The first theme focuses on processes of ruination in China. How do ruinscapes form and evolve in Chinese cities? Some ruination processes are fast and others are much slower. This research could bring together different ruination processes in China, going from urban demolition and disappearance in the case of residential ruins (Wu, Zhang, and Webster, 2013; Qin 2013; Ho 2013; Ren 2014) to the dismantling of industrial complexes and the new cultural politics of “art clusters” in China, or to the study of newly-built “ghost cities” (Woodworth and Wallace 2017), and it could even focus on depopulating villages in rural China. Ruination is understood in a large scale, including the temporality of urban decay, the factors leading to situations of failed architecture (Ulfstjerne 2017), of abandonment, of disrepair (Chu 2014). This theme also deals with memory, exploring the temporality of forgetting, for example in the case of “extreme” urban ruins caused by natural disasters like the vestiges of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake (Xu 2018). Which factors contribute to “erasing” the existing building from the urban fabric? The politics of memory, nostalgia, and indifference are important research topics, as well as ethnographies of traces (Ginzburg 1980) in order to understand different trajectories of place un-making.

- ***Theme 2: The effects and affects of urban ruins in contemporary China***

The second theme focuses on studying the social life (and death) of derelict buildings, but also the marking that affect such spaces, turning them into marginal or even “non-places” (Augé 1992), socially invisible places (Huang and Yi 2015). In this theme, research on urban decline (Mah 2012), resistance (Ho 2013), and resilience (Vale and Campanella 2015) in Chinese cities would shed light on the social processes around these ruined spaces. What effect do urban ruins have on the production of the urban space? How do ordinary people (re)create communities, lifestyles, and economic activities in semi-abandoned or half-demolished neighbourhoods? What kinds of subjectivities and desires (Rofel 2007) are expressed by the last occupants through the everyday appropriation of these landscapes? Ethnographic research on the social representations of ruins in China and on the social practices of ruins in Chinese cities, but also on the traumas, myths and legends (haunted places?) of such places would contribute to this theme.

- ***Theme 3: The texture of urban ruins in contemporary China***

Researching the texture of Chinese contemporary ruins by documenting their materiality, smells, and sounds is a way to build a reflection on the sensory dimension of such spaces and to provide another understanding on Chinese urbanity, between the city and the wilderness (Jorgensen and Keenan 2012). By carrying fieldwork in such spaces, by looking more closely at derelict architecture, the research group could raise discussions on the dialectics of density, emptiness, finding ways to describe more accurately the concrete nature of “anti-spaces”, or “in-between” spaces in a city. The various forms of deterioration that can be understood through the uses of such ruinscapes and the vocabulary (in mandarin Chinese and local dialects) used by the local population to describe and qualify such spaces (ruins, abandoned buildings, wastelands, trashed places, urban farmlands, parking lots, playful places, empty and silent spaces?).

- ***Theme 4: Documenting urban ruins. The politics and ethics of urban exploration in China***

The network will finally try to build a collective reflection on the methodology of exploring urban ruins in China, trying to build new research designs in the fields of history (Wu 2012), urban ethnography and visual methods (Ortells-Nicolau 2015). Bringing in new fieldwork practices in urban China such as urban exploration (Ninjalicious 2005; Garrett 2014a, 2014b; Davidov 2016) can be a way to infiltrate undocumented places but also to access new fields of knowledge and offer a critical understanding of the Chinese city by considering urban “anomalies” like ruins as part of the cityscape, and as aesthetic objects (Nieszczerweska 2015). The crisscrossing of different disciplines and methods is a way of transcending frontiers between the arts (photography, documentary films) and academic research in social sciences (Lam 2015) to elaborate alternate and critical visions of cityscape in contemporary China.



Figure 2 Abandoned site of the Shanghai World Expo, September 2016 (J. Audin)

This research group welcomes scholars, urban explorers, and artists in all fields of the social sciences, to show interest and start exchanging about urban ruins, forgotten places and derelict spaces in China. Comparative approaches with Hong Kong, Taiwan, and East Asia, or even post-communist societies are also welcome.

If you are interested in joining this group and organising discussions, projects, events, and conferences together in the future, please send an email to jaudin@cefc.com.hk with a quick bio and a description of your current research/artwork.

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