

FUTURE CITIES



The Shanghai Urban Planning Centre from People's Square

Robin Hambleton continues his series looking at public sector issues across the globe

Cultural revolution



Public Service Futures

To say that China is undergoing dramatic social and economic change is something of an understatement.

My college, part of the University of Illinois at Chicago has strong links with China.

Led by Tingwei Zhang, one of our professors, this international activity includes the education of students as well as research and urban policy analysis work for Chinese cities.

Last month, Professor Zhang co-organised an international conference on affordable housing, urban design and city planning, in close collaboration with seven major Chinese cities, as well as the Urban Planning Society of China.

Held in Shenyang, a rapidly-expanding city in north-eastern China, the conference sought to further US-China dialogue on housing and neighbourhood renewal.

I took the opportunity to visit several major cities – Beijing, Shanghai and Xian, as well as Shenyang – to learn more about urban trends in China.

It is this experience which suggests to me that Chinese society is undergoing a seismic rather than a merely 'dramatic' shift.

And the changes taking place there have important implica-

tions for all of us – partly because of the sheer size of the Chinese economy, and because of the startling pace of change.

China has a population of 1.3 billion and more than 100 Chinese cities now have over one million inhabitants. The Chinese Government estimates that, notwithstanding the 'one child policy' introduced in 1978, seeking to limit each family to one child, the population will increase to 1.4 billion by 2010 and, perhaps, to 1.6 billion by 2050.

This truly massive population is shifting from a state socialist past to what appears to be a largely market-driven future.

And make no mistake. The economy is booming.

China's GDP growth rate was roughly 7.3% during 2001 – and things have picked up since then.

Recent figures from the National Bureau of Statistics show that retail sales rose year-on-year by 13.1% to 462 billion

Many Chinese families are now seeking to acquire consumer goods taken for granted in the West

yuan – around £30bn in August. Yes, that's billions, not millions.

Senior researchers in the State Council's Development Research Center predict sales growth will continue at more than 10% a year for the next 20 years.

This is, by any standards, a formidable rate of growth.

In 2001, China was admitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and it was also invited – for the first time – to attend the recent meeting of the Group of Seven (G7) wealthiest nations held earlier this month.

This international reconfiguration of economic relations can be expected to underpin a further boost in China's exports to the US, Europe and Japan and, in turn, an even stronger burst in Chinese consumerism.

Many Chinese families are now seeking to acquire consumer goods taken for granted in the West. For example, washing machines, refrigerators, televisions, DVD players, mobile phones and, particularly important from an urban planning point of view, cars.

A short visit to China focusing on a few key cities does not provide a complete picture.

For a start only 30% of the population is considered urbanised.

However, that figure is likely to double in the next 30 years.

With a city twice the size of London – say 14 million – being added to urban areas each year, China is heading for a decidedly urban future. The rapid changes

taking place in Chinese cities are exciting. In a city like Shanghai – admittedly the most dynamic city in China, from an economic development point of view – there is more than enough urban regeneration taking place to justify a large, permanent city planning exhibition.

The Shanghai Urban Planning Centre is housed in an elegant, modern building, located in People's Square in the heart of the city. It contains a stunning 500m² (5,380 sq ft) scale model of the central area of Shanghai depicting every building over six storeys high, including those planned for construction.

Numerous exhibits outline possible projects and urban futures for the city.

Here, then, is an idea for every city leader. Why not create an urban planning centre in the main square of your city to inspire forward thinking and public debate, as well as provide an educational resource for your schools, universities and the public at large? The reshaping of the Chinese economy creates exciting opportunities for urban planning.

But it also presents formidable social and environmental challenges for Chinese leaders, city mayors and their officials.

I will examine these next week.

Robin Hambleton is dean of the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago