

Emerging East: Exploring and experiencing the Asian Communist City - North Korea (DPRK), China and Vietnam

Ben Masterton-Smith, UCL Bartlett, Diploma, Year 4.



Pyongyang Grand Theatre



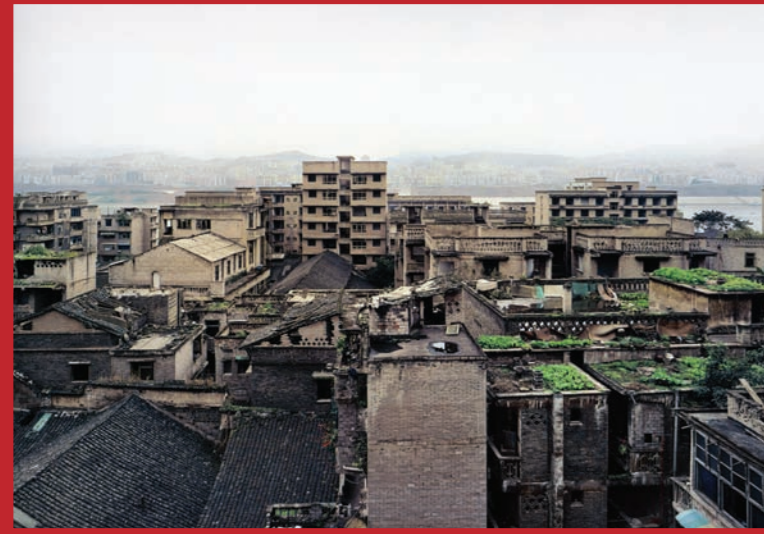
Reunification Avenue, Pyongyang



Ryugyong Hotel, Pyongyang (Unfinished)



Mass games - 'The land where children are kings'



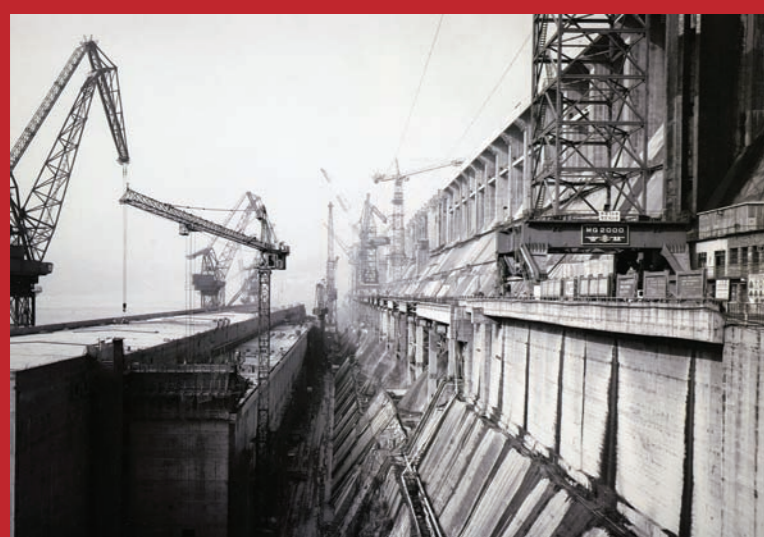
Fengdu, Chongqing Municipality



Zhabei District, Shanghai



Jiangbeicheng, Chongqing



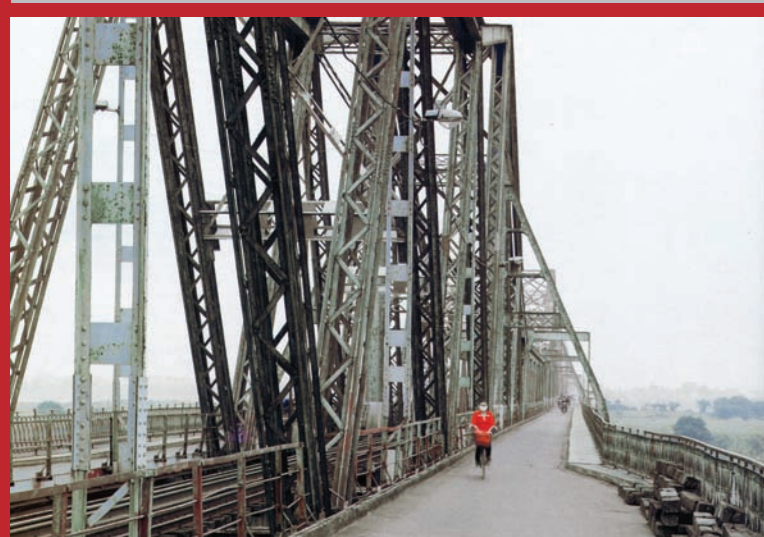
Dam Number 4, Three Gorges Dam Project



Wan Zhou, Three Gorges Dam Project



Hongqingting Shoe Factory, Wenzhou



Long Bien Bridge, Hanoi



Urban Growth, Shanghai



Changping District, Beijing

Aim:
I propose to explore the development and future of the Communist City in Asia, examining cities that have developed from the particular ideological principles of Communist regimes and have been characterised by rapid development. I plan to visit cities in North Korea (DPRK), China and Vietnam that represent different urban conditions that have developed from a similar political situation.

Feasibility:
I plan to travel for two and a half months through North Korea (DPRK), China and Vietnam, visiting primary and secondary sites of research in order to produce a comparative study on particular urban examples, examining the unique conditions affecting each of these cities. I also plan if possible to arrange a small complimentary exhibition of parts of this work at the Bartlett to coincide with the exhibition of the report.

North Korea:
Travel to North Korea is only possible through organised tours, which mainly showcase Pyongyang. I plan to take a week long tour that will leave from Beijing and will also offer me the opportunity to witness one of North Korea's spectacular mass games. I have been in contact with a tour operator who regularly organises such trips and this should be relatively easy to arrange. The DPRK is the least visited country by tourists, and as a consequence, relatively little is known about its capital Pyongyang. The city was largely destroyed in the Korean War and was rapidly rebuilt to Communist principles and structured around ideological monuments. Travel is still restricted and in itself represents the embodied ideals of the country, showing selectively what it feels are its achievements and allowing only partial documentation. I have taken a view that engaging with the city is a worthwhile exploit and provides a fascinating architectural area of study. Travel in North Korea will predominantly focus on the monumental aspects and ideals of the city, but it should be possible to get an overall understanding of the mechanisms and conditions of such a city and its inhabitants.

China
I then plan to spend the majority of my time travelling through China for around a month. In China the primary sites for study and documentation are Dandong, ChongQing, The Three Gorges Dam and The Pearl River Delta. I would first visit the Chinese border town with North Korea, at Dandong, where the developing economic principles of China meet North Korea's aborted attempt to create it's own model of a special economic zone at Sinuiju. I will then travel to ChongQing, China's third most populous city, and the Three Gorges Dam. ChongQing is an example of China's recent focus toward developing the interior regions to create opportunities for it's continuing rural to urban migration. It also offers an opportunity to examine the extraordinary projects including and surrounding the Three Gorges Dam and its impact. I will then move South to the rapidly developing Pearl River Delta to experience Guangzhou, Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SEZ), Zhuhai SEZ and Shantou SEZ). The rapidly developing cities of the Special Economic Zones have been an extraordinary example of China's rapid growth and this growth shows no sign of slowing. Increasingly this development is becoming more structured and environmentally conscious, the planned eco-city of Guangming is but one example.

Vietnam
I plan to travel to Vietnam to primarily see the contrasting cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and as a counterpoint to China's models of rapid growth. The cities have developed in the past under different ideologies- of Communism versus Capitalism, though since reunification have operated under Communist control. Recently there has been economic experimentation similar to the actions of China, and both these cities are now developing rapidly but under different variables to those in China.

Contexts:
I have a passion for China, though as yet I have only visited the major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai and Hong Kong, and briefly Qingdao and Xian. I have also been extremely interested in the closed society of North Korea. This award would allow me to study critically the conditions of China's rapid urban development, through lesser-studied examples away from Shanghai and Beijing. The trip will also make it possible to get a glimpse of the extraordinary but little known capital city of North Korea, Pyongyang. Visiting Vietnam would offer a very different perspective on the Communist city, given its history of occupation, and final reunification under Communist rule.

As part of my Diploma course, I have been studying Communism in relation to architecture as part of a history and theory unit, which has encouraged further discussion and research in this area. This course resulted in a short essay examining the influence of Piracy on modern retail architecture and the ensuing development of new ideas.

I have been critically examining and engaging with cities as part of self initiated travel projects around the world. This includes a trip to Japan in my degree graduation year as the Bartlett travel scholar to further examine notions of the foreign and the exotic, as a progression of my dissertation work based around memory and montage in photography. I find travel and photography is an extremely useful way of observing and engaging with the world, that is becoming increasingly more important with such rapid change in areas such as China.

Methods:
I have a personal interest in the notions of travel, transit and tourism and its modes of representation and I aim to further explore some of the ideas I have been developing in these areas as part of my degree and diploma work. This work has centred on the role of photography as a mode of representing travel, memory and architecture, which I have been exploring in c.j. Lim's current diploma unit, about building an assemblage of personal travel.

I plan to bring together my ideas about tourism and travel with photography and memory as a way of documenting and presenting the sites of rapid development that I hope to visit. A large part of the production of work for the project will explore photographic recording as a means of documentation. I see the tourist and traveller as a tool for engagement with architecture, and my trip is planned as a series of investigations and documentations that mediate between fieldwork studies and tourist methods of recording. In North Korea for example, photography as with all aspects of life, is rigidly controlled, with certain sites deemed suitable for photographic record. By engaging in this process I hope to explore the production of propaganda in this context as a contrast to the similar unconscious process of selecting and recording tourist sites.

Writing on the experience of the city will also be used to document my travels. I will use this as a tool to mediate between the travel journal as a record and critical writing about the urban conditions I find. I will also be drawing on my design skills as a way of describing and ordering my cultural experience.

