Frontier of East Asian Urban Design: The Tekes “Ba Gua City” of Xinjiang

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Abstract

The Town of Tekes is a planned community located in Tekes County, Yili Kazak Autonomous Prefecture, in China’s Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Known for its design of the shape of the “Ba Gua” symbols—eight symbols of traditional Chinese culture that represent individually the fundamental elements of the world and together all combinations of changes in the universe, the town is located at a predominantly Muslim area. Technically at the border between East Asia and Central Asia, I choose to discuss the planning and spaces of the Town of Tekes because of its intriguing history, and as an example of the frontier of East Asian urban design because of its close and lively link to Confucian and Taoist ideas, and its multicultural environment. The belief and practice of Yi-ching, Ba Gua, Feng shui and what’s more, the majority of the Muslim community, all point to the multicultural aspect of this Ba Gua city.

Keywords

Ba Gua, Yi-Ching, Confucian, Taoist, Frontier of East Asia, Tekes, Xinjiang, Urban Design, China Studies

1. History of Design and Settlement

The origin of the famous “Ba Gua City” of Xinjiang is difficult to search, partly because it is nowadays a renowned tourist site and a lot of articles are written about it which is not always accurate in facts. Fortunately, starting in the year of 2013, scholars organized a World Conference on Yi-ching Studies in Tekes. I have gathered three volumes of electronic versions of academic papers for the years 2013 to 2015 edited by Professor Gong Pengcheng (Gong 2013, 2014, 2015). These papers provide an empirical and an analytic basis for the research process of this paper.

In describing the history of design of Tekes County, Hu (2014) commented that “as compared to other cities and scenes of ‘Ba Gua’ design in Han-populated regions of China, which reflect a natural cultural heritage, the ‘Ba Gua City’ of Tekes is an unnatural case of cultural borders to the extreme” (53). Providing life to 33 ethnic groups, the County of Tekes was first designed by Qiu Zongjun, the Agricultural Minister of Yili in 1936, and completed under the County Magistrate Ban Jichun in 1939. It was designed according to the shapes of “Ga Gua” of the Chinese classic Yi-ching (Yi Jing), with all streets and roads interconnect to each other.

According to the County Gazetteer of Tekes, Qiu Zongjun, born in Shenyang, Manchuria, he was the father-in-law of Sheng Shicai, the "Ruler of Xinjiang" during the Republican era, by virtue of his son-in-law Sheng Shicai's power, Qiu served as the high ranking official of the Yili settlement, the commander of the Yili garrison command, and the director of civil affairs in Xinjiang. As a deep believer of Yi-ching philosophies, Qiu directed the planning of the Tekes Town using Yi-ching forms, figures, and Fengshui theories. The project was later completed, however, under the authority of Ban Jichun who was a Xibe ethnic minority. Ban was head of the project and asked Soviet Russian scientists and engineers to carry out the design of Qiu using modern science and tech-
nologies. The design of the Tekes Ba Gua City is, therefore, a combination of the efforts of multiple nations and ethnic groups and a display of the interactions of many cultures in the first place.

Qiu Zongjun's planning of the city of Tekes was not a whim; in Chinese history, such as the ancient city of Shangqiu Guide in the Ming Dynasty, the city of Shenyang in the Qing Dynasty, the city of Harbin, the streets of Changchun during the Manchukuo period, and the design of Wujiangachang in republican Shanghai all used the gos-
sip concept, but basically maintained the typical square spatial pattern of traditional Chinese cities.

It is worth noting that Tekes is distinctly different from the above-mentioned cities in that it abandons the ortho-
gonal road network and tessellation design commonly found in the traditional Chinese cities, but adopts a perfect circular radial form showing the pattern of Ba gua, a layout that can stimulate a strong sense of mystery among the sentimental crowd and trigger their desire to explore.

2. Lively Example of Confucian and Taoist Culture

Apart from its unique history of design, the County of Tekes also formed an amazing cultural landscape that is closely linked to Confucian and Taoist traditional Chinese cultures. Hu (2014) argued that the design of the Ba Gua city embodied the traditional Chinese understanding of the position of human beings in relation to nature, culture, and science. This view is in agreement with Wu's (1963) observation that Chinese architecture reflects “a cosmic ideal with man’s own image and role within it” (9).

Wu (1963) discussed in the section ‘The Square and the Circle’ from course readings how Chinese architecture and design achieved this goal of depicting human beings in spatial terms using square and circle shapes. In Wu, such designs demonstrate the high place the Chinese people give to the order of nature and the harmony in regu-
lated society (11-13). Likewise, the design of the Tekes Ba Gua city tells the same thing about these important no-
tions in Chinese culture. The Ba Gua City was designed strictly base on Yi-ching, the classic shared by Confucianism and Taoism. Eight main streets shoot out from the center of the city, symbolizing the eight directions and elements of Ba Gua. Each street is 1200 meters in long. Every 360 meters, there is a ring road connecting the main streets. Based on numbers of eight: eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and sixty-four (there are sixty-four combinations of Gua in Yi-ching). The design of the city thus matched the mathematical order of Yi-ching, which symbolized all changes and non-changes in the world, from nothingness to infinity.

The evidence of the liveliness of Chinese culture is not limited to the design. Gong (2013) used a few anecdotes to illustrate. He told us that he first noticed the “Ba Gua City” of Tekes in 2012 when the city was still quite un-
known to people. There used to be a tower at the center of city at the time of Qiu in the 1930s. In the 1980s, the tower was changed into a TV tower, and again later changed into a grand pagoda that is several tens of meters high. A few years later, the party leader of the County died in his forties. This prompted discussion that the “Feng Shui” of the tower is not good among people. As a result, the local government sent a group to Beijing to find authorita-
tive opinion on the issue and Professor Gong was one authority.

What seemed like a funny anecdote that showed the backward thinking of local people under Communist China, Gong argued, is actually an example of the living culture of Yi-ching thought -- not in academic papers but alive in folk beliefs. Gong go on to use other anecdotes including how he found a Mongolian version of Yi-ching and sev-
eral Taoist magic guidebooks that have previously only be found in Jiangxi, Southeast China, and Sichuan, South-
west, China in Tekes. These anecdotes show that traditional Han Chinese culture can not only be seen but also thriving in Tekes.

3. The Multicultural City

The location of the Tekes County itself, located in a largely Kazakh and Mongol region, is unique in its multi-
cultural expressions. Not only was one of its designers and builders -- Ban himself a member of ethnic minority, the belief and practice of Yi-ching, Ba Gua, and Feng shui all point to the multicultural aspect of this city.

Hu (2014) used the historical geographic notions of “imagination” and “landscape” to analyze the cultural signi-
ficance of the “Ba Gua City”. As people are often unhappy about such concepts as “emptiness” and “loneliness”, man-made landscapes across the world have used imagination to fill in the blanks: making rivers or mountains out of somewhere absent of rivers or mountains. In this sense, the design of the Ba Gua city is based on the imagination of heterogeneous cultures -- cultures of Confucianism, Taoism, and other Han Chinese folk religions and cultures -- that is characteristic of a multicultural landscape. On this view, the intellectual as well as folk understanding of Chinese culture on this Northwestern frontier becomes a unique point of observation of the interaction of political, social-economic, and cultural themes.
4. Urban Pattern

The Tekes County presents itself as a wheel with eight spokes radiating outwards. At an area of eight square kilometers, the central plaza demonstrates the Bagua cultural essence of “Yin Yang,” or Heaven and Earth from Tai chi philosophy. The spokes are eight major roadways stretching 1,200 meters each, constructed at congruent geometric angles extending out as rays of the Eight Trigrams of Bagua: Qian, Kun, Zhen, Kan, Gen, Xun and Li. Every 360m, a connecting road links the eight spokes. Going outward from the center, there are four ring roads. These roads follow the form of the 64 hexagrams of the Bagua, using ample land to reflect the 64 Gua and 386 Yao of the mathematics from the Yi-ching.

To prevent the people from getting lost within the rings, every street has a strategically placed directory signboard. To survey the entire country, the streets are arranged in a single mystical maze. Every lateral and longitudinal road is linked to the rest. Until now, the Tekes Bagua remains the only example in the world of a well-preserved and complete Gua and Yao. Tekes is the largest town in Bagua city on earth.

Even more interesting is the fact that the roadways of Tekes completely lack stoplights. Experts and scholars suggest that due to the inter linkage of the ring roads, connecting the streets strip by strip, traffic jams will not result at a county level. Additionally, pedestrians will be able to stay oriented and reach their destinations.

Bagua city is obviously a Zhou Yi Bagua. The Tekes Bagua layout implements a beautiful integration of theories from classical scriptures, and offers itself as a precious case study of community planning, history, and cultural values. The city is home to 22 ethnic minorities including Kazakhs, Uyghurs, Mongolians, and Kyrgyz, adding to the land’s multicultural dimension. This Ba Gua city is a living history and beautiful embodiment of the Yi-ching and Ba Gua.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I have introduced and discussed the “Ba Gua City” — Tekes County in Xinjiang, China as an example of the frontier of East Asian Urban design. Using spatial elements to imitate the teachings of Yi-ching, the Tekes Town refectes the enduring strength of traditional Chinese cultures, both in its urban design and in folk beliefs. It also demonstrates the multicultural spirit of local communities and local cultures which give rise to and are, in turn, embodied by their unique living spaces. Using media sources, I get to explain just how closely the Tekes City is modelled at the Ba Gua diagram, which words cannot describe.

References


