



Exhibition «In the Chinese city. Perspectives on the transmutations of an empire»
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Ideology and transformation

One day, economists and historians may be able to explain the brutal transformation currently underway in China, a country where almost everything is only two or three years old, and the oldest things you see are ten years old. There are divergences between those who see the Chinese process as a large-scale repetition of other processes that have taken place in the past in connection with the rise of capitalism, and those who think that a different model may be emerging, one that obeys laws with which we are not yet fully familiar. No one, however, dares to pronounce on the future of this model, which has changed the physiognomy of the country in 15 years, applying the principle of creative destruction at a dizzying rate, vastly outpacing Marx's most visionary predictions.

It all begins with demographics. One billion three hundred million people constitute an immeasurable force, particularly if they are ready for anything, raised in an age-old culture of submission and respect for hierarchy. Hundreds of millions of people have already abandoned the countryside to seek work in the city, bringing about unprecedented levels of internal migration. And there remains a reserve army of millions more who, when they leave their place of residence, become displaced persons in their own country, ready to go anywhere to find work. And all this under the authority of a Communist party that has spawned a new dominant elite made up of a modern breed of party cadres, the new business leaders and the strong men of science and technology. Subjected to tremendous political, economic and social pressure, the landscape of the cities is changing at fantastic speed. Everything old falls before the bulldozers and diggers. With the failure of the socialist utopia, citizens must now join in a new dream: China, the great power, capable once again of being the world's leading nation. The nationalism of Greater China is the ideological merchandise that the government peddles, to the cost of minorities such as the Tibetans.

China's cities are unrecognizable to anyone who saw them fifteen or twenty years ago. Whilst the unstoppable transformation continues, we thought it would be interesting to focus on Chinese urban culture. To excavate the cultural and historical roots of the Chinese city as the basis for an archaeology of the modern city. And to show the modern Chinese city as a way of understanding the scope of the great rupture currently in progress, whilst at the same time pointing out the slender lines of continuity between the two of them. The aim, therefore, is to consider a few myths of Chinese urban culture and see how they might develop in the future. From Chongqing (China's biggest city), which feels like another planet, to Beijing, with its signs and trappings of power, via Shanghai, which still has something of the bourgeois city, samples taken from the Chinese urban world will bring the visitor closer to this apparently limitless emerging power, which fascinates and worries the western world in equal measure.

The urban role of the two institutions organising this exhibition – Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine in Paris and the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona – fully justifies this joint gamble. China today is still a big unknown in the West, which perceives it with prejudices – favourable and unfavourable – that do not aid understanding. The fascination that China arouses in sectors of the business world suggests that their rejection of the Soviet Union was not because it was Communist, but because it was inefficient in its exploitation of labour. Western political leaders contemplate it with a mixture of fear and hesitation, but are very afraid to arouse the ire of the



Prologues by Josep Ramoneda to the CCCB's catalogues

Beijing government. In either case, the words change depending whether the emphasis is placed on macroeconomic data, the treatment of citizens or neo-imperial great power pretensions. In the face of such confusion, the exhibition claims only to present a series of references and icons of the past and realities of the present. A grain of sand so that European citizens can begin to penetrate that particular phenomenon which is the great urban transformation of China.