In all developing countries (and many developed ones) there is an intricate dialectical relationship between modernity and national identity. On the one hand, nationalism is very much a product of the modern age, the result of economic and political forces that have made the nation-state the social unit within which a people acquires wealth, power, and international recognition. Modernity and nationalism are inseparably linked. On the other hand, there is always a certain tension between what Clifford Geertz called the “search for identity,” which looks back to history and the past, and the forward-looking “demand for progress.” This tension is particularly acute in Asia and Africa, where the “modernity” that is the mark of progress has been defined (and often imposed) by the imperialist powers of the West—the very powers against which the new nations have struggled for their place in the world.

By and large, the struggle for (and between) nation and modernity has taken place in cities. In any society, the city is the locus of the modern. In the discourse of the early twentieth century, the “modern” city was always set against the “backward” countryside. If a nation was to modernize, the cities had to take the lead. In China in this period, with a vast countryside and a weak central government, the city also proved to be a manageable social and political unit for significant modernizing efforts. For that reason, the urban reforms that are the subject of this volume were arguably the most successful Chinese efforts at modernization in the early twentieth century. But the city was also the site of the schools, press, associations, and civil and military state organs most engaged in defining, promoting, and protecting the nation.

In studies of urban life, the tension between modernity and identity is often expressed as the conflict between time and place. In the words of one critic, much social science theory holds that in the modern era “time conquers space.” With the “internationalization of daily life” in the cities, a set of institutions and practices associated with modern life (from movies to weekends, Coca-Cola to street lights, newspapers to factory production) spreads across the globe. There is a consequent tendency for the common aspects of modernity to eclipse the differences of local cultures. Through the never-ceasing change brought on by capitalist production, a new world is created in which, in Marx’s memorable words, “all that is solid melts into air.” The constant change represented by modernity is both liberating and disorienting, bringing both empowerment and anxiety. As a consequence, one of the key problems of urban modernization is the need to construct and preserve structures and sites that will have the permanence of place and the comfort of identity. This volume is about that effort in China: the twentieth-century attempt to construct cities that would be both modern and Chinese.

The Chinese tradition of urban planning is as old and distinguished as any on earth. Classical texts describe the proper rectilinear form of the royal city, and successive dynasties built their capitals and regional administrative cities with ever closer attention to the classical models. With exceptions dictated by local topography, cities were carefully oriented to the cardinal directions and surrounded with high walls that by the late imperial period were usually faced with brick or stone. Gates with elaborate guard towers cut through the walls at regular intervals, and wide avenues led from the gates to set the framework for a north-south, east-west grid of streets. Within the walls, the city was horizontal, with only an occasional temple or government office rising slightly above a standard one- or (at most) two-story roofline. Until the modern era, Chinese cities were the largest and most populous in the world, and early European travelers marveled at their prosperity and order.
Given this glorious history of urban planning, it is somewhat ironic that in the modern era both Chinese and foreign observers saw Chinese cities as dirty, disorderly, unhealthy, and inefficient places in need of fundamental reform. The early twentieth century, from the last decade of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) through the republican era (1912–1949), saw a major effort to remake Chinese cities. Walls were torn down; streets were straightened, widened, and paved; first rickshaws and then tramways and buses speeded transport; public utilities provided water, electricity, and telephone service; new regulations promoted public health and safety, and newly organized police took to the streets to enforce them; parks and squares and athletic fields provided new public spaces; new buildings housed the functional ministries and bureaus of an increasingly interventionist state; department stores introduced new forms of commercial culture and anchored downtown developments served by the new transport; theaters, cinemas, coffeehouses, dance halls, hotels, and brothels established new modes of popular and elite entertainment; a lively press fed news and opinion, rumor and gossip, fashion and fantasies to an eager urban reading public; by the mid-1920s, radios began to appear in upper-class homes; railways, banks, and telecommunications linked the major cities in a national urban network; and for the first time, municipal governments were formed to administer cities as social and political entities separate from their rural hinterlands.

Alongside these efforts to make the city modern were efforts to keep it Chinese, or to preserve its local character. Place still struggled against time. We see this in attempts to protect historic sites and to reconfigure them to fit the requirements of modern tourism; to build modern buildings that would preserve Chinese forms; to construct modern monuments that would commemorate the nation’s history; and to configure new social and ritual spaces for the celebration of China’s present. Above all, Chinese identity survived in the small habits of daily life: in domestic spaces and the life of alleys; in food and family and neighborhood; in the little places of local history and memory that survived in any Chinese city.

**Modern Urban Types**

The walls and low houses, the rectilinear streets lined with shops, the narrow alleys where most people lived, and the architectural form of public buildings both religious and secular were sufficiently similar across China that an eighteenth-century European observer could remark that “there is almost no difference between the majority of towns of China, so that it is almost enough to have seen one to get an idea of all others.” Like so many outsiders’ generalizations, the observation reveals both a blindness to subtle distinctions and a useful comparative insight. But however uniform eighteenth-century Chinese cities may have been, by the twentieth century such generalizations would have been impossible. By then, a number of distinct urban types had emerged.

Some cities, like Shanghai, were treaty ports: commercial entrepôts opened to foreign trade by treaty with the Western powers and Japan, and usually including concession areas governed under foreign consular authority where Chinese sovereignty was severely constrained. Tianjin, Canton (Guangzhou), and Hankou in the tri-city complex of Wuhan were other important treaty ports, and each is discussed in this volume. With their foreign concessions and commercial functions, treaty ports were a distinct Chinese urban type. They were nodes of Western (and Japanese) power and influence. Foreign consular jurisdiction in the concessions provided a degree of autonomy from the fiscal and political reach of the Chinese state. This autonomy attracted a great deal of Chinese economic, political, journalistic, and cultural activity. Much of China’s modern industry, virtually all modern banking, most major newspapers, publishers, and film studios were located in the concession areas. These factors lent a distinctly modern and cosmopolitan flavor to treaty port life, but also marked these cities as centers of imperialist power and alien cultural influence.

From the late nineteenth century, the Western enclaves in Shanghai (as well as the British colony in Hong Kong) offered accessible examples of order and progress that Chinese reformers sought to emulate. From the stand-
point of Chinese urban reformers, the concessions provided a model and a challenge for their own modernizing agenda—especially in the areas of hygiene, public works, and policing. At the same time, the fragmented sovereignty of the treaty ports made comprehensive planning difficult and citywide mobilization of resources impossible. Divided sovereignty also made it far easier for prohibited or regulated activity (prostitution, gambling, dance halls, narcotics) to flee from one jurisdiction to another. Especially in Shanghai, fragmented sovereignty encouraged the growth of criminal gangs as a necessary institution to enforce contracts across jurisdictional boundaries.

The prominence of the concession areas gave the treaty ports a distinctive urban morphology that Linda Johnson has called a “dual city.” The concession areas generally faced the water, were oriented to commerce, and featured central business districts dominated by Western colonial and neoclassical architecture. The Chinese areas were oriented to a status-hierarchy centered on the official yamen and a City-God temple. Even the residential architecture differed in the two areas, as windows faced the street in concession houses, while the Chinese city’s housing presented a honeycomb pattern in which streets and alleys were lined by walls, and the houses faced interior courtyards.

If the treaty ports represented one distinctly modern urban form, their primary urban counterpoint was the administrative center, especially the capital city. The classical morphology of these cities has been well described in the literature: cardinal orientation, rectilinear streets and walls, fortified gates, focus on the palace or official yamen, internal division into distinct quarters, market areas away from the center and near gates. A recent study has shown Qing dynasty Beijing to have been one of the most intensively policed cities in the world, with one police officer for every thirty residents and some 1,219 Inner City street gates confining residents to their own neighborhoods at night and facilitating social control. This great visibility of street-level policing stood in direct contrast to the invisibility of imperial power, confined behind the walls of the Forbidden City.

The republican capitals sought a dramatic break from this imperial mold. Each of them is discussed in this volume: the early Republic’s capital in Beijing (1911–1928), the Nationalists’ capital in Nanjing (1927–1937, 1945–1949), and the wartime capitals in Wuhan and Chongqing. In Beijing, imperial spaces were transformed into public parks. In Nanjing, the model was international and favored building a new capital city, as in Washington, D.C., or the more recent capitals in Canberra or Ankara: wide streets, open vistas, monumental public buildings, Western architecture (with Chinese “hats”), and windows that opened official structures to the public—although walls seem to have kept the view more from the inside out than vice-versa. In Wuhan and Chongqing there was less attempt to construct lasting structures or monuments lest the wartime capitals come to symbolize more than a temporary retreat from Japanese-occupied Nanjing and the coast. In all cases there was a particular concern to structure the capital to impress not just the citizens of the Republic, but foreign visitors as well—a concern that was not uniquely Chinese, as one also sees it in Hitler’s contemporaneous plans for Berlin or Mussolini’s for Rome. Inherent to the search for national identity was the quest for international recognition: “one aim is to be noticed,” Geertz observed, as “being somebody in the world.” Since international recognition and approval came especially to those who proved their modernity, this quest for recognition produced another inherent link between national identity and modernity: one gained respect as a nation and people only by being modern.

The final capital city treated in this volume is Changchun, which as Xinjing (New Capital) became the seat of the Japanese puppet regime called Manchukuo. The plans for Xinjing were the most grandiose of any of China’s twentieth-century capitals. With plenty of open space to work with, the Japanese designed a city of broad boulevards, extensive parks and green spaces, large plazas for parades, a modern subway, and impressive public buildings. Here was a true colonial capital, with a foreign look as pronounced as the other new cities of the northeast, Harbin and Dairen (Dalian). But Changchun also provides a comparative foil with which to look back at the Chinese plans for Nanjing and Beijing.

Treaty ports and capitals, cities of commerce and of
administration, cosmopolitan cities and distinctly Chinese ones—these are familiar dichotomies in the study of modern Chinese urbanism. They have been expressed most clearly in discussions of the distinctive styles of Shanghai and Beijing, the fast-paced cosmopolitan metropolis famous for money making, modern women, and vice, and the old capital, which had become a depository of cultural tradition. But these are not uniquely Chinese dichotomies, for new nations the world over built capitals in the interior to escape the polluting influence of commerce and colonial culture in their leading ports: Ankara (vs. Istanbul) in Turkey, Islamabad (vs. Karachi) in Pakistan, New Delhi (vs. Calcutta and Bombay) in India, Brasilia (vs. Rio) in Brazil, Canberra (vs. Sydney) in Australia, Abuja (vs. Lagos) in Nigeria, and even Washington, D.C. (vs. New York) in the United States. In every case, the new capital was designed to express a distinctive national identity, against the cosmopolitan (or colonial) modernism of the ports. For all their importance, however, ports and capitals do not encompass the full range of urban experience in modern China.

A third type of city, especially on the level of contemporary consciousness, was the interior city. In many ways this was a distinctly modern urban type, because it emerged out of contrast to the rapidly modernizing coast. Before the era of treaty ports, there was no fundamental difference between coastal and interior cities. In the twentieth century, however, and especially during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945), when so many coastal Chinese fled inland, the interior city was invariably characterized as backward, dirty, unhealthy, conservative, and lacking the cultural and material marks of modernity. We see this in Lee McIsaac’s description of the “downriver” people’s accounts of wartime Chongqing (see chapter 11), but very similar images emerged when refugees from Japan’s 1932 attack on Shanghai fled to cities like Yangzhou, and they pervaded such popular novels as Ba Jin’s Family and Mao Dun’s Rainbow.

Before the war with Japan, there was never a national effort for long-term development of the interior—and nothing even remotely similar to the Brazilian project to recenter the nation on Brasilia, or the efforts that created Ankara and Islamabad. Only wartime necessity spurred such an effort, and cities like Chongqing, Chengdu, Kunming, Guilin, Lanzhou, and Luoyang saw their populations rapidly increase by 50 to 100 percent as the war brought an influx of soldiers, students, and industrial workers. The war also brought buses, autos, and paved streets, with all the reordering of urban space that those changes entailed. The wartime industrialization of the interior was continued as a policy of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), as many of these same cities were targeted for industrial development beginning with the First Five-Year Plan. Despite significant romanticization of the rural interior by novelists like Shen Congwen or academics in the folklore movement, there was little discussion of a distinctive role for China’s interior cities. Instead, these cities were routinely measured by the unattainable standards of the coast, and especially Shanghai. This certainly spoke to the importance of Shanghai in defining the modern for Chinese cities, but it also trapped the interior cities in a discourse that would always hold them up (or down) as “backward.”

Liping Wang (see chapter 7 of this volume) reveals a fourth type of city, the tourist city. In the PRC, after 1949, such cities would be designated “cultural cities,” recognized and supported for their supposed preservation of the physical vestiges of China’s cultural tradition. In the republican era such cities were rare but important, because here more than anywhere a conscious effort was made to create a distinctly Chinese urban landscape. Hangzhou and Suzhou were certainly the most famous, but as Madeleine Dong shows (see chapter 8), Beijing also assumed this role after 1928, when it was renamed Beiping and ceased to be the capital. Such cities are interesting both for the deliberate “invention of tradition” involved in the promotion of tourism, and for the particular effects of this commodification of the city itself. Tourism required a careful combination of modern conveniences (railroads, buses, hotels, restaurants, and souvenir and photo shops) with cultural sites that could be presented as historically authentic.

David Buck (see chapter 5) introduces a fifth type of city, the railway city. Railroads unquestionably affected most major Chinese cities, breaking through walls and
recentering certain activities around railway stations. The train station always attracted hotels, urban transport, and some shops, and frequently faced a public square with some civic monument. Public rituals of welcome and farewell for important political figures were staged (and photographed) at the station. This happened in any city served by trains, but cities like Changchun, Shijiazhuang, Zhengzhou, or Xuzhou really owed their existence to the railroad. Located at major railway junctions, these cities were new (or vastly expanded) communities built almost from the ground up. In the northeast, the Japanese-run South Manchurian Railway Company planned and built much of Changchun. As company towns, these cities bore important formal and functional similarities to railway towns elsewhere, especially North America.

It is symptomatic of the pace and shape of China’s economic development that one of the most distinctly modern urban types, the industrial city, was scarcely seen in republican China. After 1949, any number of cities could be classified as industrial cities, especially the eighteen cities targeted for industrial development in the First Five-Year Plan. Cities that in the republican era were primarily railway cities (Changchun, Shijiazhuang, Zhengzhou, Baotou) are prominent on this list, which also includes more purely industrial centers like Anshan, Luoyang, Taiyuan, and Lanzhou—most of which got their start under the Japanese in Manchukuo or during the war against Japan. In the early twentieth century, China’s industrial production was concentrated in the treaty ports. Shanghai (with 31 percent of the factories in 1937) dominated industrial production, and Tianjin was northern China’s industrial center. But these treaty ports were primarily centers of trade, finance, and services, and they cannot really be classed as industrial cities. The closest approximation to purely industrial cities in this era were mining cities such as Tangshan in Hebei, site of the Kailuan coal mine (with seven mines and 42,000 miners), the Qixin cement company, and a railway shop. Tangshan was clearly an industry town, and the massive enterprises also supported schools, hospitals, bathhouses, and company housing. But in the republican era, such a city was notable mostly for being so exceptional.

A final urban type would be frontier cities, which have been described elsewhere by Piper Rae Gaubatz. Especially along China’s northwestern frontier, these cities had a number of distinctive features. Built largely by Han administrators, they rigorously adhered to the rectilinear ideal for administrative centers, but they also tended to be divided into dual cities, separated along clear ethnic lines. In Inner Mongolia this division was usually between a Han commercial city and a Manchu garrison; in the northwest, between a Han administrative center and a walled Muslim suburb. We see something of this duality in the northeast as well, with Russian settlements in Harbin and Japanese settlements in Changchun and the southern Manchurian cities providing an intriguing colonial variation on this dual city theme—a variation with obvious parallels to treaty ports.

Modern Chinese cities differed from their imperial predecessors not only by being more diverse in function and morphology, but also by virtue of the new urban hierarchies in which they were embedded. In the imperial era, Chinese cities were conceived as part of a unitary hierarchy of county, department, prefectural, and provincial capitals all oriented toward the Son of Heaven in the imperial center. This hierarchy was represented in bureaucratic chains of command, official rituals, and the successive levels of the examination system. At every level, uniform systems of architectural, behavioral, and visual symbolism expressed the unity of the imperial system. But in the modern era, the treaty ports (and especially Shanghai) challenged the centrality of the political centers, and a new developmental hierarchy was created between the modern coast and the “backward” interior.

It is tempting to analyze this new development in terms of the dichotomy between cosmopolitan treaty ports and self-consciously Chinese political centers—the urban expression of the dual struggle for modernity and national identity—but this would be too simple. Modern means of communication linked all of these cities into a single system, and political, economic, and cultural elites moved easily between them by rail or steamship. Although modern capitalism required a greater separation of economic and political spheres than prevailed under the empire, the mod-
ern state required close ties to the new industrial and financial powers. Thus the Guomindang moved the national capital from Beijing to Nanjing in 1927, in large part to be closer to the economic center in Shanghai. In the realm of culture, Beijing opera was promoted as “national theater,” but none rose to star status in the modern era without successful tours to the new theaters of Shanghai. Foreigners may have regarded Shanghai as the cosmopolitan “Paris of the East,” but the city’s Chinese residents (in addition to their taste for Beijing opera) were hungry enough for Chinese history and culture to be the mainstay of the culturegarden tourist industry in Hangzhou. Despite the underlying tensions between modernity and national identity, the two were inextricably linked, and that linkage was fundamental to the structure of modern Chinese urbanism.

The Modernist Project

Despite the great diversity of modern urban types, there was remarkable uniformity in the modernist agenda of China’s urban reformers. This uniformity reflected the universal characteristics of modernity, but it was also the product of a common model: city planning in the West and Japan, and the visible examples of the new urban order in Hong Kong and the treaty port concessions. When the late Qing reformer Kang Youwei first visited Hong Kong in 1879, he was impressed by “the elegance of the buildings of the foreigners, the cleanliness of the streets, the efficiency of the police.” These, of course, were exactly the areas where urban reform began in the West. A concern for public health (and its effect on industrial productivity) led the way. In England, the 1842 Sanitary Report of the utilitarian civil servant Edward Chadwick and subsequent research linking the cholera epidemics of 1848–1849 and 1853–1854 to polluted water supplies provided the key impetus for systematic efforts in public hygiene and town planning. In Paris, Baron Haussmann’s formula involved broad boulevards and impressive vistas, building codes to regulate the public faces of new apartments, a safe water supply, and sewers so hygienic they could become a tourist attraction.

It has been said that the Revolution of 1848 made Haussmann’s reforms in Paris possible as “the discourse of salubrity, cleansing, aerating, movement” became infused with political meaning. Political crisis was similarly crucial in China. The hygienic reforms in Tianjin, described in this volume, were set off by the foreign occupation of 1900–1901. The Revolution of 1911 brought fundamental reform to Hangzhou and Beijing; new regimes initiated urban reform in Canton and Chengdu in the 1920s; and the rise of the Guomindang after 1927 was critical to the reorganization of Nanjing and urban reform in Shanghai. Across the country, revolution provided the opportunity to sweep away the physical as well as the political corruption of the old order and to create a new, clean, and efficient urban environment.

The Nationalist revolution of the 1920s created a special opportunity for new, young, technically trained people to take up ambitious agendas for urban reform. Many of these men had been trained abroad, where universities and professional associations promoted urban planning under the influence of men like Le Courbusier, Lewis Mumford, and Frederick Osborn. Such foreign-trained architects and engineers, and some American advisers as well, were particularly important in the plans for urban renewal in the Guomindang strongholds of Canton, Shanghai, and Nanjing. In the new Shanghai municipal government, the technical bureaus responsible for hygiene, education, public works, and public utilities were led by new men with technical university training, often acquired abroad.

On the southeast coast, overseas Chinese returned to Xiamen (Amoy) to provide the capital, expertise, and political will to lead an aggressive urban modernization. In city after city we see the same menu of reforms, and often the same sequence. The first task was usually to tear down the city walls, invariably building a wide, paved ring road where the wall had stood, a road often traveled by trams. In Canton, the task of tearing down the walls was contracted to the tramway company in exchange for its right to the route. The object of this effort was invariably to ease the flow of commerce, the same dynamic that brought down the walls of European cities. It expressed as much as anything the triumph of a new discourse of economic development over old concerns for security, and a shift from controlling to facilitating the movement of goods and people.
This same concern for mobility is seen in efforts to widen, straighten, and pave the main urban thoroughfares. In all Chinese cities, the press of population and the proliferation of shops and stalls in the commercialized economy of late imperial China had gradually narrowed the wide boulevards of the original urban plans. In north China especially, dirt roads with centuries of accumulated dust and debris became impassable quagmires in the rainy season (see fig. 1). In the early Republic, the encroaching stalls and storefronts were cleared away, producing straight paved thoroughfares. The macadamized streets permitted the introduction of the rickshaw, a new vehicle that spread rapidly throughout China at this time; and in the 1920s and 1930s, the larger cities would add tramways and bus lines.36

Public hygiene was a concern everywhere: clean water, regular night-soil collection, public toilets, garbage disposal, rat control—an intensive effort to make cities look and smell clean.37 Ruth Rogaski (see chapter 3) has described the effort in Tianjin. The concern for public health led to vaccination programs and quarantines to prevent epidemics, the registration and examination of prostitutes to control venereal disease, and health exams in schools to ensure a healthy future citizenry. The control of narcotics, especially opium, was motivated as much by a concern for a strong and healthy China as a desire to check criminal activity.

In order to carry out this more intrusive surveillance and disciplining of public behavior, cities across China organized uniformed police as one of the first steps toward reforming urban society. In many ways the police were the visible face of municipal reform, “street-level bureaucrats,” to use David Strand’s term, “pioneer agents of the modern Chinese state.”38 Their responsibilities went well beyond

Fig. 1. Commercial street in Chinese section of Changchun (see map 8), late Qing. Rain could turn streets into a quagmire. Note electric lines and street lights, early signs of modernization. Shop at far left belongs to British American Tobacco. A Japanese photo courtesy of Library of Congress.
crime control, as they collected taxes to support their operations and fund municipal government; protected public health by inspecting food vendors and guarding against spitting, urinating, or defecating in public; and promoted public morality by enforcing regulations to control narcotics, gambling, prostitution, and begging. As such, the police served as "domestic missionaries" promoting (and prohibiting) a wide range of public behavior with an intrusiveness never before seen, even in the closely policed imperial capital. Under the authoritarian Nationalist regime after 1927, their responsibilities expanded to include censorship, inspection of the mails, and political control. Their power was such that Frederic Wakeman, in his study of the Shanghai police, has associated them with what he calls "municipal autocracy."39

To carry out and direct this effort at urban reform, new institutions were needed. Under the empire, cities were not separate administrative units. At best they were seats of counties or prefectures whose responsibilities included a substantial rural hinterland. Most large cities and provincial capitals were divided between two separate counties, as in Canton, described in chapter 2. In the treaty ports, the fragmented sovereignty of foreign concessions further impeded an integrated urban administration. Coordinated efforts at urban planning and reform required new institutions of municipal government (shizheng). Such institutions were first formed in Beijing in the early Republic and authorized by national regulations of 1919. Canton, under the Guomindang, initiated its own model of municipal government in 1921. Other cities followed suit in the 1920s, in the context of a broad national discussion of municipal governance in professional journals and lobbyist associations.41

With the institutions of municipal government in place, the Nanjing Decade (1927–1937) of Guomindang rule was a period for grandiose plans in many cities. The Nationalist project for a new capital in Nanjing is discussed by Charles Musgrove in this volume (see chapter 9); Christian Henriot and Kerrie MacPherson have described the plans for an entirely new civic center in the Greater Shanghai Project.42 But in both of these cases, fiscal constraints blocked completion of the grand plans. Urban renewal had its greatest success when circumstances presented the authorities with relatively cost-free solutions, as in Hangzhou where the 1911 Revolution freed up for development the choice lakefront property that had previously been occupied by the Manchu garrison.

Urban renewal is an exceptionally costly enterprise. The most successful urban renewal project in history, Haussmann’s transformation of Paris, was achieved only with complex deficit financing. Increased revenues generated by economic expansion following each stage of the decades-long process helped refinance the continuously rolled over debt until the sum reached 2.5 billion francs in 1870, interest charges ate up 44 percent of the municipal budget, and the popular outcry brought Haussmann down.43 Shanghai’s urban renewal was also financed by debt, but especially after the destructive Japanese attack of 1932, even China’s richest city could not generate adequate revenues to carry out its grand plans.44 With the national budget dedicated to the military priorities of fighting the Communists and preparing for war against Japan, even less progress was made on building the new capital in Nanjing.

One consequence of the financial weakness of the new municipal administrations was the delegation of many modernizing projects to private (and often foreign) enterprise. Public utilities (of which water and electricity were the most important) were almost always provided by private companies—and usually run by foreigners. Balancing the public interest and the logic of profit-making companies was a constant struggle—a struggle often complicated by the conflict between concerns for modernization and concerns for national sovereignty.45

The New City Landscape

The reorganization of urban space was a fundamental part of the modernist agenda. In Beijing, imperial ritual sites were turned into public parks.46 Trees were planted along major streets for shade and aesthetic effect on the model of the “City Beautiful” movement. A modern set of public buildings was deemed essential to a modern citizenry, so that cities everywhere built public libraries, museums, auditoriums, exhibition halls, and sports stadiums. Spaces were cleared for public squares, and patriotic and
revolutionary monuments were erected—although rarely to significant public acclaim. More popular were the new sites of urban entertainment: theaters, cinemas, dance halls, amusement centers, coffeeshops, restaurants, and hotels.

By the republican era, most major city streets were lit at night, first by gas, later by electricity. Shanghai, of course, led the way in lighting its streets, permitting lively entertainment districts and a reputation as the “city without night.”47 Well-lit streets became one of the classic marks of modernity as the “city of light” conquered darkness and the enlightened city made public places safe to stroll at all hours of day and night.48

One characteristic of the late imperial Chinese city was the absence of a clear center. Neighborhoods were the primary focus of identity. Separate neighborhoods each had their own religious association, for worship of the Lord of the Earth (tudi gong).49 Most shopping for everyday goods was done from itinerant peddlers or at neighborhood markets. Major markets tended to be located at city gates, or even outside the walls. At important trading centers like Shanghai or Canton, the main commercial districts were located outside the city walls. Here were warehouses and markets for interregional trade, and also the native banks and huiguan (native place associations), which catered to the economic, political, and cultural needs of the mercantile community.50

The twentieth-century city almost invariably had a center, an identifiable “downtown” whose defining feature was retail commerce. Michael Tsin has described this process for Canton (see chapter 2), which forsook the old commercial district in the west to transform the official core into a downtown with department stores and terminals for the buses and tramways that brought customers. Hangzhou transformed the former Manchu garrison into a New Business District (Xin shichang), a center of tourism and commerce that supplanted the old commercial district around City-God Hill. Chongqing and Wuchang also built New Business Districts, which seem to have been a favorite idea of city planners of the early Republic. Throughout the country Shanghai’s Nanjing Road in the international concession was the model that all strove to emulate: a wide, clean, orderly center of commerce and entertainment, with department stores, hotels, restaurants, and upscale cinemas.51

Downtowns were not the only new centers of the modern city. Railway stations and the plazas that faced them were another center of shops, hotels, and civic rituals. Parks, described in this volume by Madeleine Dong (chapter 8), contained not only places for fresh air and relaxation, but also museums and athletic fields that made them important centers for entertainment, the education of citizens, and political demonstrations. What is most striking and important about all of these centers is that their defining structures—department stores, railway stations, hotels, cinemas, public parks, and museums—were all creations of the modern city, new institutions that brought anonymous strangers together in new ways, creating new social connections for the modern metropolis.

Such centers would not have been possible without the modern means of transport that facilitated movement beyond one’s own neighborhood. Increased mobility—the circulation of goods and people—was one of the defining characteristics of the modern city anywhere. Modernity entails movement, crossing social and physical space.52 In China, the rickshaws, trams, and buses that followed the paving of main arteries facilitated this social and economic circulation. They made downtowns possible.

Urban Identity, Urban Behavior

The new mobility was inter-urban as well. Without it, Hangzhou’s development as a tourist city was unthinkable. The steamships and especially the trains linking China’s major cities in the republican era also helped produce a class of people that was distinctly urban, but not necessarily tied to any particular city. Brett Sheehan (see chapter 4) has illustrated this phenomenon in his analysis of modern bankers, who were as mobile as money could make a man. But the same could also be said of the entertainment and, to some degree, the intellectual elite, which moved easily between Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Canton—and brought their urban lifestyles to Chongqing, Chengdu, and Kunming in the interior during the war.

Other modern means of communication linked China’s twentieth-century cities, helping to create a mod-
ern culture that was distinctly urban. Motion pictures were perhaps most important, a medium confined to the cities and by and large devoted to urban subjects (in part because the most popular movies were made in Hollywood). Movies were the classic modern medium, because they allowed people to imagine alternative futures. But the print media were also important, and here Shanghai journals dominated a national market made possible by the postal service and rail and steamboat transportation. These media particularly addressed an audience of “petty urbanites” (xiao shimin), but they were urbanites who could live in virtually any Chinese city.

The conventional wisdom has long held that there was no sharp cultural distinction between urban and rural in traditional Chinese culture, but instead an “urban-rural continuum.” More recent voices have contested this view, positing an “autonomous urban culture” in the late imperial period, a culture expressed in novels and in urban merchant or literati lifestyles of bookstores and antique shops, brothels and teahouses—a lifestyle quite divorced from the life of the soil. I am personally more inclined to accept the latter view, but whatever the case in late imperial China, there is little doubt that in the modern period the urban-rural gulf was palpable and real.

As cities modernized, the modern became associated with the cities. If “peasant” (nong) was not a pejorative term in imperial China, the modern term “country bumpkin” (tu baozi) most assuredly was. From the viewpoint of the city, peasants were “backward,” superstitious, and conservative. The difference between urban and rural was visible everywhere. City people dressed differently: many men forsook long gowns for Western suits, uniforms, or the new Sun Yat-sen outfits after the mid-1920s; women wore skirts and blouses or qipao (themselves a modern invention) that men from the countryside found shockingly revealing. Women bobbed their hair or had permanents; men greased theirs and combed it back, or covered their heads with fedoras. Young men and women lived by themselves, or with friends and colleagues, or in company dormitories. Living apart from their families they had unprecedented freedom, which found expression in their social and sexual lives.

Work in the city also implied a different sense of time. The city worked by the solar calendar, the seven-day week, and the twenty-four-hour day. Working by the clock both disciplined and sped up the pace of life, but the work-week produced weekends and time for leisure activities, which tended to be distinctly urban: the cinema or shopping, excursions to a park, museum, racecourse, or sporting event; for the less wholesome: a visit to a casino, dance hall, or brothel; or simply gathering to eat and drink with friends. On special occasions the weekend might afford a vacation to some tourist site—by train, on schedule.

The new urban lifestyle obviously entailed new freedoms, and young people in particular welcomed the variety of diversions and opportunities for self-expression that urban life provided. These freedoms were not restricted to middle- and upper-class men. In Shanghai, working-class women from the cotton mills saved their meager earnings to dress up and go to the movies, the opera, or window-shopping with their friends—some even leaving their families to live with coworkers for the greater freedom it brought. But as theorists from Marx to Weber have recognized, modernity is a “condition that at once empowers people and constrains them.” Some of these constraints were legal. As community sanctions became less effective in the anonymous city, the police enforced new restrictions on public behavior. Vagrancy, hawking without a license, obstructing traffic, improper dress, littering, spitting, urinating, and “disturbing the peace” became punishable offenses.

In one of the enduring images of Ba Jin’s novel, Family, proper upper-class women in the conservative “pre-modern” city of Chengdu could move in public only in closed sedan chairs. As the modern city opened up streets and public spaces to women, reordering gender relations required a host of new regulations. Guidebooks introducing visitors to the new disciplines of urban life recorded the new rules in detail. One Tianjin guidebook of 1911 listed 125 regulations related to public behavior, including regulations against men and young women riding together on rickshaws or entering bathhouses hand in hand, or against young men “gathering around and joking when women and girls go in and out of schools and factories.” When it became acceptable and popular for women to attend the
opera, most cities had regulations requiring separate entrances for women and seating in the balcony.

It was not just official regulations that trained people to the new modes of urban behavior. The new, mobile, anonymous conditions of modernity themselves engendered new ways of behaving. In a memorable short essay, Lu Xun describes how women “accustomed to life in Shanghai” adopt manners that are “both provocative and wary, seductive and on the defensive . . . friendly yet hostile to the opposite sex” as a way to deal with salesmen and other strangers in the department stores and boutiques of the city. This gradual transformation of public behavior affected men as well:

If you live in Shanghai, it pays better to be smart than dowdy. If your clothes are old, bus conductors may not stop when you hail them, park attendants may inspect your tickets with special care, and the gate-keepers of big houses or hotels may not admit you by the main door. That is why some men do not mind living in dingy lodgings infected with bedbugs, but insist on pressing their trousers under the pillow each night so that the creases are sharp the next day.

Beyond Shanghai

By citing Lu Xun on Shanghai customs I am of course succumbing to the common convention that takes Shanghai as the representation of the modern Chinese city. As noted in the preface, this volume had its origins in a conference titled “Beyond Shanghai.” The intent was to gather a group of studies on cities beyond Shanghai to present the full range and diversity of the urban experience in modern China.

But going beyond Shanghai cannot mean ignoring Shanghai. Shanghai may not have been, as the famous subtitle of Rhoads Murphey’s 1953 book described it, “The Key to Modern China,” but it was certainly the dominating urban presence on the national landscape. G. William Skinner has argued compellingly that late imperial China did not have a single integrated urban system, but a set of nine regional urban systems. Central to his argument was the lack of a single dominant economic and population center for the entire country. But certainly on the economic front, all that had changed by the 1930s: Shanghai’s economic dominance was now unchallenged (except, perhaps, in the Japanese-dominated Manchukuo). In the 1930s, Shanghai was estimated to employ 43 percent of China’s industrial workers and produce 51 percent of the country’s industrial production. The statistics provided by Sheehan on the financial front are even more impressive. In 1935, of China’s twenty-three largest banks, those headquartered in Shanghai controlled 97.9 percent of the capital.

Shanghai’s dominance was not simply economic; its cultural influence was enormous. China’s major publishing houses, like the Commercial Press, were located in Shanghai. The important newspapers and journals with a national circulation were published in Shanghai. The new movie industry was almost exclusively based in Shanghai studios, and the advertising industry naturally established its base in China’s premier commercial center. Only Beijing could rival Shanghai as a center of universities and intellectual life. Shanghai’s modern culture industry made the city both a model and a magnet. When the hero of Ba Jin’s best-selling novel finally escapes his hometown, he immediately heads for Shanghai, where “all that was new was developing.” Those who could not go to Shanghai imitated its style, as in Tianjin, where a 1921 guidebook dolefully noted that “everything follows Shanghai,” or in Kunming, where the wartime expansion of the city produced a “Shanghai-style main business road with four- and five-storied buildings and Western-style architecture.”

As a result of its tremendous economic and cultural influence, Shanghai was a city with a “significance well beyond its own limits.” We see this most strikingly in Lee McIsaac’s description of wartime Chongqing (see chapter 11), where the measures that “downriver” people held up to judge the new capital’s progress toward modernity were all derived from Shanghai: “big mansions, cinemas, coffeehouses, western eateries, shiny cars and buses and neon lights.” One might have expected Chongqing, as the new national capital, to be compared to Nanjing, but that was not the case. Only Shanghai was a proper standard of modernity.
There was hardly a city that was not linked in some way to Shanghai. Hangzhou’s rise as a tourist city was predicated on the proximity of Shanghai and its new middle class—a middle class that wished to escape the Westernized treaty port for a taste of “authentic” Chinese culture. Tianjin’s banks and bankers were closely linked to Shanghai and its financial elite. Much of Beijing’s modern identity as a city of tradition and culture was constructed in explicit contrast to the crass commercialism of Shanghai culture.

A Place for History

The examples of Beijing and Hangzhou remind us that Shanghai, despite all its influence, was still not China. In the contestation between modernity and Chinese identity, Shanghai certainly represented modernity—but the modern Chinese city still had to find a place for China, a place for history. Even in Shanghai, when the new Civic Center was planned, the architects of the first plan were chided for their failure to adapt “traditional Chinese architecture to modern city planning.”

The desire to combine national stylistic motifs and modern construction materials has been a constant theme in the architecture of emerging nations. It has been most conscious and explicit in the designing of national capitals where planners have sought to “define a sense of national identity by careful manipulation of the built environment.” Charles Musgrove examines Chinese efforts to do this in chapter 9 of this volume. But a century ago, Louis Sullivan enunciated the canonical principle of modern architecture: “form follows function.” As a result, the form of most modern buildings has been dictated by their modern functions, and national identity has largely been relegated to their ornamentation, and especially their roofs. Indeed, the rhetoric of such design schemes often portrays a distinct dichotomy between national forms appealing to aesthetic sensitivities and local sentiment and modern structures representing universal rational principles.

In general, republican China was not terribly successful in constructing monuments to celebrate the nation’s recent history. Dong (chapter 8) describes the futile efforts to commemorate revolutionary heroes in Beijing, and McIsaac (chapter 11) describes the quick collapse of the “Spiritual Fortress” monument in Chongqing. The one unquestioned success was the Sun Yat-sen Memorial in Nanjing, with its impressive park-like extramural setting and the reflected glory of the nearby tomb of the first Ming emperor. But, as Musgrove shows, fiscal considerations frustrated plans to locate the national government at the foot of the memorial, although a massive sports stadium was built there and hosted a hugely successful 1933 national games. To the extent that national identity was fostered through new construction, it was in such efforts as sports stadiums for athletic meets to display the new, strong national body, in public educational sites like the museums and libraries, or in the many modern theaters built for traditional drama performances—especially for Beijing opera, which in the Nationalist era assumed a new identity as “National Theater” (guaju). National identity was promoted in China’s cities through the preservation and representation of historic sites. Chapters 7 and 8 of this volume show this most clearly. In Hangzhou there was a great deal of “invention of tradition” in the construction of this historical playground for the middle class of modern Shanghai. In Beijing, once the Manchu emperor had been expelled, there were plenty of imperial palaces and parks to amuse and edify the citizens of the republic—and remind them of the nation’s glorious past. In these cities, urban leaders vigorously promoted historical preservation as part of their urban renewal strategy and marketed their cities as tourist sites where modern China could meet its past.

Above all, however, Chinese identity was preserved and promoted in smaller and less public ways. If public architecture (except for the roofs) was largely Western, vernacular architecture and interior decorating maintained much of its Chinese flavor. There was perhaps a sense in which many Chinese were modern in public and Chinese at home (much as the cliché describing imperial scholar-officials as Confucian at work and Daoist off duty). Certainly in the small spaces of home and alley and neighborhood—away from the main streets and the bright lights—there was ample place for history and Chinese identity in China’s modern cities.
Organization

This volume is organized into three main parts: The Modernist City, Tradition and Modernity, and City and Nation. We begin with five views of the modernist city. Michael Tsin’s essay on Canton (chapter 2) introduces the new spatial order of the modernist city. In a discussion ranging from streets to statistics, sanitation to social surveys, parks to department stores, Tsin explores the dual logic of emancipation and discipline, which the modernist project entailed. In the new city created under the Guomindang in the 1920s, he sees a new political rationality, predicated on a new spatial order, which enabled “the imaginary of an enclosed, rational and ordered regime.”

From Canton, we turn to two chapters on Tianjin. In chapter 3 Ruth Rogaski examines public hygiene in this north China treaty port and the new social discipline brought by the effort to clean up the sights and smells of the city. In the “hyper-colony” of Tianjin, with the divided sovereignty created by the concessions, controlling disease vectors was a difficult task, but the treatment of the city as a “medicalisable object” (in Foucault’s terms) was taken up with energy. The result was new and more intrusive forms of social control to ensure clean water and sanitary waste disposal.

While protecting public health required new monitoring of urban behavior, Brett Sheehan, in chapter 4, writes about another source of “behavioral urbanism”: the cosmopolitan professionalism of bankers—a group that symbolized the status bestowed by money in the modern Chinese city. He argues persuasively that just as banks and their branches linked Chinese cities together economically, bankers formed networks and moved in social circles that gave them a distinctly urban identity—but an identity not tied to any particular city. Interestingly, however, a concern for rural credit in the 1930s led banks and bankers to try to reestablish links to the countryside, at precisely the same time that writers and intellectuals were showing a new interest in rural matters—no doubt influenced by the growing communist insurgency among the peasantry.

From these coastal treaty ports we turn to a quite different site of colonial power in David Buck’s history of Changchun (chapter 5). Buck charts the northeastern city of Changchun through three stages of development: as frontier town, railway city, and utopian capital. From a frontier trading center in northern Manchuria, it grew with the development of the railway, first by the Russians, then by the Japanese. As a railway town, it displayed elements similar to North American railway cities, with streets in a regular grid and separate residential and commercial districts; but it also, given the colonial planners, evinced a dual-city morphology similar to China’s treaty ports. The final stage, as utopian capital city, is described in telling detail. We see the links to contemporary utopian schemes in the role of Japanese planners who had studied with Le Corbusier, but also the attempt to create a distinctive “Developing Asia” style of Japanese colonial architecture that would combine modernist functionalism with Asian tradition. The axial streets, broad plazas, and large ceremonial spaces give Changchun a unique colonial modernist look among China’s cities, and Buck skillfully excavates this forgotten history of a utopian colonial capital.

In the final chapter of part I, Kristin Stapleton documents the important fact that modernist urban reform was not confined to coastal treaty ports or colonial capitals. Her discussion of the warlord Yang Sen’s urban renewal effort illustrates the extent to which the 1920s campaign for more activist urban administration and construction was truly national in scope. With professional journals and such lobbyist associations as the road builders, municipal administration advocates pressed for better and cleaner streets, sewers, toilets, parks, and trees—all of which significantly transformed even a distant interior city like Chengdu. The arbitrary authoritarianism of Yang Sen’s efforts made his tenure in Chengdu quite short, but the reformist project he initiated was continued with energy after his departure.

Part II includes three chapters on Tradition and Modernity. Liping Wang opens with chapter 7, on the tourist city of Hangzhou. Hangzhou’s urban landscape was radically transformed after the 1911 Revolution, as the former Manchu garrison was remade into a New Business District along the shore of West Lake. In the culture garden constructed along the lake, tradition and modernity were si-
multaneously created for the benefit of tourists from Shanghai's new middle class. But at the same time that Hangzhou was promoting an elite tradition of cultural sightseeing, it was neglecting and suppressing the old ritual and commercial center around City-God Hill. While a cultured past was carefully reconstructed for urban tourists, a popular religious tradition that formerly linked city and countryside in annual spring pilgrimages was suppressed.

In chapter 8 Madeleine Dong describes the republican elite of Beijing, the former imperial capital, seeking to redefine the city as a cultural foil to the Westernized money-oriented Shanghai. Like Hangzhou, Beijing sought to project an image of “Chineseness,” especially after it ceased to be the national capital in 1928 and began systematically promoting tourism—although in this case a tourism designed especially for foreigners. The result was the commodification of the city, with “Chinese tradition” on display. In the effort, the past was able to survive, not as part of a meta-narrative of the nation, but as “things”—scattered material forms that resisted the erasure of local identities by universal industrial time.

From Beijing’s attempts to preserve the historic sites of an old capital we turn, in chapter 9, to Charles Musgrove’s analysis of the Guomindang’s effort to create a new capital in Nanjing. Here, foreign-trained architects and engineers and American advisers worked to create a modern capital by international standards. The concern for large public spaces and dramatic vistas represented unequivocal breaks in Chinese thinking about capital cities. But in its architecture, the new capital sought to create a “modernity with Chinese characteristics”—buildings whose basic form was shaped by modernist functional considerations, but adorned with aesthetic and symbolic elements (especially roofs) expressing continuity with Chinese tradition.

Part III focuses on City and Nation and treats China’s two wartime capitals. When Japan invaded China proper in 1937, the national government was forced to flee inland. Unwilling to signal an abandonment of the coast by any effort to establish more than temporary capitals in Wuhan and Chongqing, the Guomindang made few efforts to remake the physical structure of these cities. Both cities had seen some transformation in the 1920s and 1930s (more in Wuhan than Chongqing), but they were most notable for the transformation of their political cultures and their efforts to symbolize the nation.

Wuhan, described by Stephen MacKinnon in chapter 10, had a unique revolutionary tradition as the city where the 1911 Revolution began and where the left Guomindang established its government in 1927. In 1938, this tri-city commercial and industrial metropolis became China’s capital at an unprecedented moment of tolerance and political diversity in the first year of national resistance to Japan. MacKinnon describes the remarkable agglomeration of cultural figures from China and around the world—writers, dramatists, journalists, cinematographers, doctors—who joined the city’s politicians, students, and industrial workers to create a unique moment in China’s history. As “China’s Madrid,” Wuhan came to symbolize not just the nation, but the active imagination of a new political future for China.

In chapter 11, Lee McIsaac describes wartime Chongqing, the final stop of the Guomindang as it moved its capital up the Yangzi, ever deeper into the interior. She describes the striking bifurcation of the city’s image: dirty, rat-infested, and “backward” where it fronted the river, but modernizing in the conventional ways (cleaning streets, expelling beggars and prostitutes) in the upper city atop the rocky bluffs. The façade of modernization was especially important to present to foreign visitors. But the domestic effect, with “downriver” outsiders in charge of modernizing municipal governance, constructed a dichotomy between the modern coast and the backward interior. While the magnetism of the national government attracted people from across the country to Chongqing and made the city a microcosm of the nation, the symbolic dichotomy between modern leaders and a “backward” city inevitably divided the population.

Chapters 12 and 13 were written as commentaries on the ten preceding chapters. Jeffrey Wasserstrom has provided a view from Shanghai—that all-important and much-studied symbol of China’s urban modernity. Shanghai was a city that no other Chinese city could ignore. In one way or another, the residents and leaders of other cities envied, imitated, guarded against, studied, and criticized
the Shanghai model. Many of the chapters in this volume have explored the multifarious practical and imaginary ways in which particular cities related to Shanghai. Wasserstrom reflects on these chapters by exploring the various ways in which “Shanghai exceptionalism” has been conceived—in particular the multivalent notion that “Shanghai is not China.” He examines the various ways in which Shanghai has been compared and contrasted to other Chinese cities; and he concludes by suggesting that one reason such comparison is so difficult is because there were, in fact, so many Shanghais. This very multiplicity of Shanghais made it much like other modern cities: London, New York, or Los Angeles. Indeed, we might suggest, the multiplicity of Shanghais was but another aspect of its modernity.

To conclude the volume, David Strand both comments on the preceding chapters and looks forward to the next stage of research on modern China’s cities. Reflecting on the diverse manifestations in Chinese cities of this era, he explores the interaction of new technologies and old habits, of urban imaginings and material culture, of resistance to change and emerging urban hybrids. In a challenging and provocative essay, he suggests that despite the shortcomings and failures of urban reform and the agenda left incomplete by a state still too weak to order and discipline the city, the twentieth-century Chinese urban experience played a central role in shaping the imagined future for China.