Urban Culture and Urban Cultural Space

Ho Si Quy

Prof., PhD, Institute of Social Sciences Information, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences
Email: hosiquy.thongtin@gmail.com

Abstract: *The twenty-first century is considered the urban century. As a matter of fact, cities play an important role in history in general and in cultural history in particular. Performing as special organizational form of spaces, cities become administrative, political, cultural or economic centers. Urban people with urban culture and civilization attached to these centers is both the result of urban life and the cause of the unique urban appearance. The concept of cultural space is an extension of Lefebvre's concept of social space. In a broad sense, cultural space is considered as one of development forms of culture, including institutions for cultural activities and creations, sociocultural networks, and cultural services, etc. As for today's cultural space, people often pay more attention to specific cultural spaces that are designed and created by particular actors with defined economic and social goals.*

1. Introduction

Urban cultural space is a major issue of discussion in a close relation to Vietnam's urban spaces, from major cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city to small towns in different localities. The country's rapid economic growth in recent decades has accelerated the massive urbanization in all provinces and cities. That would be great, if the urban planning and management capacity of all government levels would also develop proportionally. Unfortunately, there was a mismatch between the country's development pace and the level of urban planning and management. At the same time, many occurrences have proven a wide gap between a civilized urban lifestyle and the cultural level of urban communities.

The urban cultural space, which turns out to be an environment for the recreation and development of civilized urban lifestyle, plays as a crucial factor that determines the unique appearance of the urban space. In ideal cultural spaces, urban people could be considered a special social assembly of high culture, or urban culture; and the cities could perform their functions of administrative, political, cultural, or

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economic centers of a country or territory. In order to obtain a thorough understanding about the issues, it is necessary to have a closer look at some theoretical issues about urban cultural space that have been well developed far ahead of Vietnamese urbanists by the Western scholars.

2. Urban culture

Traditional studies of urban culture often examine operation and management institutions, urban architecture, and urban residents' lifestyle, or in other words the popular cultural forms featured with urban characteristics. Urban science has been developing intensively as an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field within intercultural depth and historical width.

Until the 20th century, Henri Pirenne's description in his *Medieval Cities, Their Origins and the Revival of Trade* (1925) was still critical for the comprehension of urban culture. The two fundamental features of urban culture, according to Pirenne, included having a middle class and having a collective organization of urban residents which was relatively independent from the control of local lords and the clergy. Meanwhile, residential communities gathered to perform commercial functions (Pirenne, 1925).

A great influencer on urban cultural studies was Max Weber. In his *The City* (1921), Weber presented five must-have characteristics of an urban cultural community: 1) forts; 2) markets; 3) laws and court systems; 4) social institutions for urban residents; and 5) political autonomy for selection of the city's governor. He argued, while contrasting with the East,

that the cities there did not possess all the aforementioned characteristics because such factors like cultural identities, ethnic relations, families, or lineages prevented the urban dwellers from forming relatively independent urban communities from their authorities. From this distinctness, Weber advocated an open interpretation of urban culture since there was no single type of urban culture to fit all cultures (Cited from Prasad, 2003: 50).

In the 1940s, Robert Redfield - a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, United States (US) - introduced the concept of urban culture: it is the control of a process of breaking into traditional cultural characteristics. Based on the studies of the US urbanization, Redfield claimed that when the rural-to-urban migration, i.e. the urbanization of rural areas, occurred the traditional social characteristics of rural societies, such as homogeneity, tranquility, respect for the sacred and personalities, would be replaced by the culture of impersonality, heterogeneity, secularity and disorganization. This is the variation of urban culture. Social happenings like divorce, loneliness, drug addition, crimes, etc. also rooted from urban culture (Cited from Prasad, 2003: 50).

American sociology of urban culture, from Redfield's views, could be considered the methodological foundation for all types of urban culture. Although American scholars has proven Redfield's certain false arguments and deficiencies, his school of urban sociology had explored extremes and uncontrollable emancipation of individuals in urban culture caused by the trends of social order disruption during

the urbanization process. In today's cities, it is important to pay attention to migrant communities, social trials, lifestyle dissent groups, political opinions, urban order violations, crimes, and so forth.

A Swedish sociologist, Gideon Sjoberg, is the one who proposed the classification of cities in the world into two groups: preindustrial cities and industrial cities. In his *Preindustrial city: Past and Present* (1960), Sjoberg demonstrated the birth of preindustrial cities as early as in the societies of human labor and working animals. Contrary to the industrial level of post-medieval cities, there was a cohesion of racial and ethnic relations among individuals in preindustrial societies. In the Western European urban culture, connections among lineages were often very strong and traditional institutions for ensuring social order, such as churches, religious institutions, or cultural beliefs, also gained their footholds. Some among those even played the dominant role in urban societies (Sjoberg, 1960). Sjoberg's arguments, however, have been criticized that they were only reasonable for countries with early urban culture that has been preserved until today. Because in modern societies, particularly in non-European countries, it is difficult to verify the existence of preindustrial cities.

Western scholars often focus on the variation of traditional culture in urban cultures, including Eastern cities. Paul Wheatley, professor of geography and history from the University of Berkeley, had examined carefully four ancient capitals of China, namely Chang'an, Luoyang, Beijing, and Nanjing, and then came to the conclusion that the oldest cultural form of these cities was ritual centers (Wheatley, 1971). The cities at first assumed an organizational function and were centered towards the peripheries through the practice of rituals. It was not until later, according to Wheatly, that economic/business and political functions were added into urban culture. This finding had shed light on the cities' religious functions. Not all scholars agreed, however, particularly when the economic function of many ancient cities in the East had been performed very early through business activities.

In 1970s, David Harvey, Manuel Castells, and other Marxist scholars in America and Western countries contributed to a major change in the conception of urban culture. Their approach is to see the city as the convergence of all cultures and of the world's social systems. Harvey (1973) in *Social Justice and the City* and Castells (1977) in *The Urban Question* had explained the issues of American urban culture that served the development of capitalism. Changes of urban centers and peri-urban areas were attributed to a new consumer culture that is stimulated by the capitalist utilitarianism. Cities thus became the environment for social conflicts originated from divergences between social classes in the capitalist society (Cited from McKeown, 1980).

Today's issues of urban culture that have been the focus of urban research centers include urban governance and social issues in urban environments. One question is whether the 21st century should be seen as an urban century or not. Urbanization is a one of the world's currently drastic and

irreversible trends. Humans are living in a new urban era where most of them living in cities and towns. It is estimated that more than 90% of the world's future population will reside in cities in Asia, Africa, America, and Latin America. Although the demographic transition in the process of urbanization is slower in developing countries, it is expected to be achieved by 2030. In 1975, there were only three megacities in the world, including Tokyo, New York, and Mexico City. In the first two decades of the 21st century, megacities of more than 10 million people are projected to continue to emerge in developing economies (WUP, 2005).

Poverty, however, also enters cities, which is regarded as the urbanization of poverty. Urban slums increase proportionately with the growth of urban population. Cities, as the economic drivers of most countries, play a critical role to poverty reduction and provision of services to the poor. Their contribution to national economic development, indeed, is very significant[1]. However, experts have warned that the rate of urbanization might not correlate with economic growth rate. There is even an inverse correlation between urbanization and economic growth rates in Africa, Latin America and some areas of India. Analyzing the urbanization of 187 cities in more than 100 countries, Fay and Opal (2000) concluded that rural residents were not moving to cities because the countries and regions had reached a positive level of growth. This process is referred to as 'urbanization without growth', which results in a higher severity of urban social problems. In such urban areas, only about 10% of the urban population are formally employed while a majority of migrant workers are in the informal sector and only few of them could obtain decent jobs.

Since the early 21st century up to now, socioeconomic and environmental issues as well as demographic challenges in European cities have become more present. The indigenous population is in danger of declining. Cultural diversity also intensifies existing social problems, dividing the European communities. Nevertheless, the economies in the continent remain strong and relatively stable while urban space has been expanded in recent decades. Local governments in Europe, the product of urban institutions, remain steady and almost unchanged. The fact that economic cities have become larger than administrative cities across Europe somewhat has limited services for public interests. The problem of urban culture in today's Europe is to modernize the public sector at all levels of urban governance. The European model of governance requires an integration of spatial governance of urban functions and administrative structures (Tosics, 2011).

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[1] While Sao Paulo accounts for 10.5% of Brazil's population, it generates 19.5% of the country's GDP. The corresponding statistics are 1.2% and 2.9% for Shanghai (China); 32.5% and 63.2% for Buenos Aires (Argentina); 2% and 6.3% for Mumbai (India); 9% and 20% for Nairobi (Kenya); and 7.9% and 14.9% for Dar es Salaam (Tanzania). In particular, the share of GDP is two times higher than the share of population in Shanghai, Manila, Brasilia, Cape Town, Karaobi (there is no city in the modern world named Karachi) and Nairobi. It is more than three times higher in Dhaka, Yangon, Mumbai; 4.6 times higher in Addis Ababa; 5.6 times higher in Hanoi; and 6 times higher in Kinshasha and Kabul (See: UN-Habitat, 2011: 10).

3. Cultural space

Products of human activity take cultural forms ultimately. The efficacy, contents and values of such products are conveyed, shared and transformed in human communities. This is the essence of the processes of cultural formation, exchange, and acculturation. Every culture is associated with a certain geophysical space. All cultural phenomena are subject to that the regulations and human activities in that space. Spatial features of culture are primarily dependent on the geographical characteristics of the place as well as on the physical and spiritual activities of individuals and communities. These are the most common ideas about cultural space (Жданов, Давидович, 1979).

Cultural space, in a broad sense, could be comprehended as the place where cultural phenomena occur and be sustained, developed and passed on in the community. A cultural space includes social institutions of cultural subjects, activities that create culture, and geophysical features of the place where the culture is created. The cultural space has greater significance and value than the inherent value of the geographical area that is selected as a cultural space. A cultural space, in fact, is a derivative of culture. The concept of cultural space is shaped when the culture of a space has reached a certain level in a culture. Thus, a cultural space has a definite limit due to the target orientation of human activities (Masolo, 2002). Accordingly, a cultural space is related to and a part of the concepts of social environment, social space, cultural environment, and cultural area[1], which

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[1] Cultural area is different from regional culture.

all are interpreted as cultural space in Vietnamese also.

A large number of scholars believe the concepts and comprehensions of cultural space have been derived from those of Lefebvre (1901-1991), a French philosopher and sociologist of social space. His *State, Space, World* published in early 1974 was a selective compilation of his philosophies. Lefebvre (2009: 186) stressed that all spaces in the human society are social spaces and always the social products. Space used to be associated only with mathematics and physics. Since Lefebvre, concepts of living space, festival space, village space, cultural space, or social power space, etc. have become familiar. Theories about special and particular types of social space, including those of cultural space, have emerged also since then.

According to Lefebvre (2009), space is envisioned as a very special product of all social relations and as an operational mode and a communicational network. It is always attached to technology, knowledge, communities, and states. In this sense, cultural space almost coincides with social space. Moreover, culture is much broader than society because it includes all that humans create and think of. Thus, from a cultural perspective, Lefebvre's view of social space could be considered the thinking of cultural space as well.

Cultural space includes defining boundary (of a specific cultural space), center and periphery (of that cultural space), scope (global or local), values and roles or functions and social significance (of the cultural space). For specific cultural spaces,

their unique characteristics and identities always attract particular attention.

Cultural identity is often reflected through unique features of cultural phenomena or cultural products that define that culture. Although this way of comprehension of cultural identity is commonly acceptable, it is noticeable that cultural identity is also exposed through daily activities of human communities, or in other words a collection of indelible differences in the lifestyles of cultural subjects. Cultural identities thus are formed in different historical contexts and from the viewpoints and outlooks on life of different generations in communities as the patterns of culture that govern and regulate the living activities of following generations (Ho Sy Quy, 1999: 51).

The identities of specific cultural space do not reflect only geophysical phenomena and spatial structures or special cultural products created by cultural subjects, but also the activities of people and communities, distinctive behaviors and ways of communication, material and spiritual products. The unique features of outlooks on life and the world and of life experiences play a critical role. In fact, cultural identities of cultural spaces have created cultural matrix that governs and defines the activities of the following generations.

Previously, cultural space was considered one among cultural development modes in modern societies and of significant value in socioeconomic development. In terms of management, cultural space is one of the deployment institutions for cultural forms, sociocultural networks, cultural creation mechanisms and cultural services. The development of cultural space accordingly leads to a gradual reduction of cultural differences and promotion of progressive social behaviors. The right orientation of cultural space development would therefore foster sociocultural development.

Currently, the attention is often paid more to specific cultural spaces that are designed and created by particular subjects with defined goals to serve socioeconomic activities. Following this apprehension, a cultural space is aimed for the formation of a unique and creative space that provides people with products and amenities of civilization as well as cultural products and values depending on the identified themes of each cultural space (Crespi, 2020).

4. Urban cultural space

"Rus in Urbe" (lit. country in the city) emerged around the 1st century BC in Rome. The urban architecture in Rome at the time attached a great importance to the natural landscape and takes into account the functioning of powerful institutions of the Roman Empire, such as Senatus Romanus, squares, triumphal arches, and environmental factors. The Romans believed building a city that reflected the local landscape would help enforce the people's resilience and happiness and the power of the Roman army as well. This style of architecture later had influenced the British urban architecture as a cultural space was created in a close relation with the country's nature (Usai, …, 2017).

Urban cultural space in London indeed has a long and proud history. The theoretical and practical example of London had inspired the construction of cultural spaces in western countries. The British architecture

of parks influences significantly the development of many European cities. Private parks in London were built during the 17th and 18th centuries, before the existence of public green spaces. British parks demonstrate clearly the human creativity in the simulation of natural wilderness. And today's London remains one among the world's greenest cities.

In the US, cultural urban spaces have been developed in association with entertainment, arts, and landscapes since the early 19th century. The more developed the economy, the more specific purposes the cultural spaces would serve. The division of urban spaces also reflects the increasing differences in the use of cultural spaces among social classes (Roberts, 1970).

In Northern Europe, public cultural spaces in urban areas used to receive little of concern. It was not until the 20th century that public spaces for social, political and cultural gatherings and open cafes appeared (Große, 2016). Today's green spaces and cities have become the pattern of urban architecture. There remains the gap, however, between the idea and reality. Urban cultural space is often comprehended in a narrow sense in the subjects of urban studies like urban architecture, urban sociology or urban culture. Accordingly, it is defined as a designed space for cultural activities or other artistic settings such as theaters, museums, performing centers, entertainment areas, parks, statues, and so forth.

Nevertheless, the broader conception of urban cultural space is also applied as the core spaces that make up the appearance and position of the city, such as infrastructure, traffic, townhouse planning, administrative and political centers, squares, parks, amusement parks, etc. In this sense, urban cultural space should include: (i) the city's natural geographic conditions; (ii) the city's people and major communities as well as social characteristics and key activities of urban residents; (iii) urban architecture; and (iv) spiritual life of urban residents (Каган, 2006).

Cities play an important role in general history and particularly cultural history. They are in fact a special organizational form of spaces based on the functions of the spaces and particular social sets that are combined of human communities and their cultural practices. Cities perform their functions as administrative, political, and cultural centers as well as economic hubs of a country or territory. It is the city's multifunctionality that regulates its spatial architecture, which in turn would facilitate and promote further the city's special functions.

Each city often has its own appearance that distinguishes itself from others. Cultural space defines one of the most important aspects of culture that is the appearance of cities, which is reflected through the urban landscape. People and culture are connected to the environment and societies, both in the past and the future. Physical landscape, civilization and technical achievements have been harmonized with the spiritual life and activities of humans – not just of one generation but others from the past and of the current.

Cultural space functions to recreate and develop an urban lifestyle that satisfies the needs of urban residents. Urban cultural space is characterized by some qualitative

and quantitative indicators, such as urban population, population diversity and plurality, the size and age of the city, urban infrastructure, cultural institutions like educational establishments, libraries, information centers, opera houses, theaters, museums, etc. Thanks to its diversity, urban cultural space provides an environment for interaction between different cultural layers and forms. The acculturation and cultural exchanges allow cities to opt for the most suitable cultural phenomena among standardized values, principles, patterns and behaviors that transferred from the past to present and future (Yinong Xu, 2000).

Conclusion

In brief, urban cultural space is where happens the acculturation and exchanges of different cultural forms and layers. Although some ancient cities were spontaneously formed to meet the needs of then urban residents, urban cultural space is often designed with specified purposes and with social mechanisms that are operated and governed by recognized institutions. The main function of urban cultural space is to recreate and develop the urban lifestyle and defines the unique appearance of the city. Human communities form a special population set, that is urban residents, to enable this function of urban cultural space as the administrative, political, cultural and economic centers of a country or territory ❑

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