

# Image-oriented design control in China: case studies from Nanjing

## Abstract

This paper investigates urban image-making through the lens of different sets of design control tools and mechanisms in use in the Chinese planning system before 2019. It takes the South Railway Station area of Nanjing, part of a planned new town, as the case study and examines the design and planning of the overall area, a sub-area and two selected building sites. The research offers an understanding of the performative role of urban planning in place promotion with its distinctive Chinese characteristics, which are related to the planning culture and socio-political context of China. The paper identifies a few problems resulting from an image-oriented approach to planning in the case studies. Firstly, planning strategies have stressed grandness as opposed to the human scale and wide spatial qualities. Secondly, the approach has emphasised marketability of urban images rather than the representation of socio-cultural values. The study suggests that place identity catering for the interests of ordinary citizens should be foregrounded in design control in new town development in China.

**Keywords:** image-making, place identity, design control, urban planning, place promotion

## Introduction

Urban aesthetics and urban image have been an essential concern in design and planning in the West since the latter half of the nineteenth century. Numerous urban practices at the time and scholarly work later (by Cullen 1961; Hegemann and Peets 1922; Sitte 1965 and others) have long established the visual art tradition of urban design, which has been well-developed up to and including the present day (Carmona et al. 2003). All these practices have capitalised upon the symbolic value of urban images (Nas 1993). While in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, urban beautification projects in the West frequently served a strong political ideology (Sonne 2003), they were also useful for a city's competitiveness, attractiveness and land value increase. At the same time, they benefit urban identity, which in turn strengthens place identity and residents' quality of life (McCarthy 2006). Today, under the forces of globalisation, place promotion has increasingly become an objective of urban planning internationally, and place identity a primary goal in the regeneration of post-industrial cities. Inevitably, there are issues and challenges related to image-building, particularly in terms of the tension between marketability and socio-culturally enriched symbolism, of which there is more discussion in the next section.

Extensive research has examined the urbanisation process of Chinese cities and its consequences (Fang and Yu 2016; Hsing 2010; Li 2019; Long and Gao 2019; Wu 2018; Yeh and Wu 1996, and others). However, there has been very little focus on the design control aspect of urban planning as a formal approach to shaping urban form in China. This research aims to investigate how design control tools in China are harnessed to produce a particular urban image for place promotion, and to identify any 'Chineseness' in the outcome of design control. It intends to contribute to the debate around image-building, identity and the performative role of urban planning. To do this, it examines the South Railway Station (SRS) area development in Nanjing, one of the most internationalised Chinese cities (Zhou 2002). The SRS is a strategic area of the city's planned Southern New Town due to its role as a transit node in the regional transportation network. The area was almost a *tabula rasa* before comprehensive planning was enacted in 2007. The SRS has been selected for this research because it provides an example of how planning actions have shaped urban images in new towns and the values represented by these urban images. The large-scale production of urban form and substantial top-down design control manifest in the development of China's new towns and cities is not only a useful lens through which we can gain a better understanding of the operation of the Chinese planning system but is also relevant to similar place production in China and other fast-developing countries.

This paper starts by drawing on the literature which addresses the relationship between urban images, place promotion through performative planning, and urban identity. It then reviews the concept of design control in China's planning system and provides an explanation of the research methodology. Next, it presents the case study. The paper finishes with a discussion of the distinctive Chinese characteristics of design control and the challenges which result from an image-oriented approach to planning.

### **Images, place promotion and urban identity**

Urban aesthetics and image is a form of art accessible to the urban masses, thus making it a powerful means by which the public authority can attempt to regulate its citizenry (Hastaoglou-Martinidis 2011). Large-scale restructuring of urban images at the turn of the twentieth century was often associated with the modernisation of traditional cities and the need for national identity building following a country's independence or the establishment of new regimes (Hastaoglou-Martinidis 2011; Guo 2004; Larson 2003; Oktay 2002). In order to showcase the grandness and order of a new society, the axial streets and uniform street facades following Beaux Art planning principles were often adopted, for example, in Haussmann's reconstruction of Paris. The symbolism of such significant features of urban form was conceptualised by Kevin Lynch (1960) as a city's 'imageability', able to provide a measure of how easily a physical environment would evoke a clear mental image in the mind of observers. Later research showed that along with other urban qualities, imageability added to property value (Ewing and Handy 2009).

Globally, in the past three decades, imageability has become instrumental in place promotion, which has been defined as 'the conscious use of publicity and marketing to communicate selective images of specific geographical localities or areas to a targeted audience' (Gold and Ward 1994, p. 2). Investors, businesses, tourists and residents have been attracted by distinctive characteristics that differentiate one place from another (Braun 2008; Kavaratzis 2004). The symbolic capital of urban images was commodified in place promotion (Gold and Ward 1994; Kotler and Gertner 2004, p. 50). Sophisticated marketing strategies have been employed in public administration as a form of urban entrepreneurship (Hall and Hubbard 1998), with the public sector utilising planning tools and mechanisms to construct a 'semiologically loaded visual environment' intended to 'modify the urban gaze' (Eshuis et al. 2014; Lovering 2007, p. 362). Such a 'visual landscape' (Mavromatidis 2010) has been consumed nationally and internationally, through various forms of media. In the attempt to create the desired image, many public authorities have also intended to show the 'effectiveness' of urban governance (Lovering 2007), which together were referred to as the performativity of urban planning (Peel and Lloyd 2008). However, the literature also suggests that the fictive spectacle of urban images has usually been linked with an inaccurate representation of the city (Boland 2013). For example, highly selective images created as part of the city design process have not necessarily been grounded in the local cultural milieu (Holloway and Hubbard 2001), but have emphasised marketability (Pollard 2004; McCarthy 2005). As a result, image enhancement of cities may elevate consumption and spectatorship, but at the same time compromise economic and social equality (Boland 2013).

Since China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001, many Chinese cities have actively participated in global competition. As part of this engagement, place promotion has grown in importance, with common strategies in China including commissioning signature buildings from international star architects (Ren 2011) and building themed places and towns (Hartog 2010), as well as hosting hallmark international events such as the Olympic Games in 2008 and the World Expo in 2010 (Broudehoux 2007; Zhang and Zhao 2009). Another strategy for enhancing a city's competitiveness has been the construction of new towns in proximity to existing cities (Chen and Thwaites 2013). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Chinese central government announced its plan to build 20 new towns every year before 2020 (Fang and Yu 2016), and by 2016 at least 3500 new towns had been constructed in the country, with a total planned population of 34 billion (Xinhua Daily Telegraph 2016). Revenue obtained from leasing the land within these new towns has been a significant source of income for local governments (Song et al. 2020). However, some scholars have argued that the quality and/or long-term sustainability of new developments has often been compromised (Song et al. 2020, Xue et al. 2013), and it is this discussion which provides the political context for the case studies of the present research.

Many of these urban projects have been associated with the creation of a 'paradigm city', free from slums, informalities and pollution (He and Wu 2009; Wu et al. 2013). This so-called paradigm city would showcase a particular lifestyle and landscape aesthetics, thereby enhancing its attractiveness to investors, tourists and social elites. However, some scholars have argued that such planning actions are not genuine place improvements (Broudehoux 2007; Zhang and Zhao 2009) and have instead often resulted in negative social consequences such as the displacement of residents, gentrification, and the marginalisation of rural migrants (Logan 2002).

Some scholars have also argued that the benefit provided through the creation of urban images does not necessarily contribute to place identity (Kalandides 2011; King 2016; Vuignier 2016). While urban identity refers to the physical characteristics of the city (Oktay 2002), place identity is a social construct. Closely related to the sense of place (Relph 1976; Tuan 1980), place identity can denote that a person's sense of self arises in part through their transactions with the material environment, in 'a process of appropriation and re-appropriation rather than invention' of the physical space (Julier 2005, p. 885). The environment is thus not just a setting for one's activities and behaviours but incorporated as part of the self over time (Krupat 1983; Proshansky et al. 1983). Place identity is forged around a deep-seated familiarity, rootedness (Tuan 1980) and the existential 'insideness' of an environment (Relph 1976; Proshansky 1978). It encompasses both one's personal and social aspects of self (Twigger-Ross et al. 2003) and can operate at the individual and collective levels. Place might also contain historical referents to facilitate the continuity and distinctiveness of self (Jackson and Penrose 1993; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996). This social construct of place identity provides the basis for the reflection on identity building that this paper presents in the cases. At the same time, Lewicka (2011) suggested that the physical characteristics of cities are stronger predictors of sense of place among higher income respondents, with lower income participants relying more on social ties to form place attachment. This argument coincides with the claim found in the literature and mentioned above that the urban images intended for place promotion appeal mostly to investors, tourists and social elites.

In China, the concept of urban images (or aesthetics) is encapsulated by the planning term, *feng mao*. Discussion of this first appeared in Liang's paper (1988) in relation to the identity crisis caused by the homogeneous urban landscape that had been constructed in China since the 1980s (Wang 2012). The numerous new towns built since then often adopted international building types, technologies and spatial production models (Chen 2008). *Feng mao* is supposed to showcase both a city's physical characteristics of the built and natural environment as well as its cultural meaning (Wang 2012). However, in planning practice in China, the focus has always been on the physical aspect, from the consideration of the natural settings of the city at a large scale to districts and core areas at the medium scale, as well as landscape symbols at the small scale (see, for example, Li and Huang 2016; Zhang 2003). One way to provide an antidote to the identity crisis would be for the appropriate *feng mao* of a city to project a unique urban image, usually locally based, that differentiates the city from elsewhere. In December 2015, the Urban Working Conference of the State Council of the People's Republic of China advocated for building urban identity through the careful creation of urban characters and management of *feng mao* in planning practice. A Circular issued by the State Council on 29 April 2020 outlined measures for promoting good *feng mao* through tighter design control of large public buildings and buildings in important urban areas. The Circular called for urban images that showcased cultural confidence, a contemporary spirit and Chinese characteristics; copycat buildings or skyscraper over 500m were not to be permitted (State Council of P.R.C. 2020). A subsequent Circular published in Oct 2021 banned new buildings over 250m tall to be built in cities less than 3 million people (Ministry of Housing and Rural Development of P.R.C. 2021). The following section reviews the concept of design control, its tools and mechanisms, as they operate in the Chinese planning system.

### **Design control and its operation in the Chinese planning system**

By definition, design control is employed by the public sector to scrutinise both the outcome and the process of design practice (Carmona 2016). It mostly refers to top-down interventions in design matters, which are often driven by public policy concerns such as economic development, social justice, and environmental benefits as well as aesthetics (Carmona 2016). In the literature, urban design qualities such as permeability,

legibility, identity, robustness, liveability, ecology and resilience are advocated for good design (see, for example, Bentley et al. 1985; Larco 2016). However, these qualities need to be interpreted within a particular context. As public sector actions, formal design controls are delivered by the planning system, and the tools and mechanisms employed range from, among others, design policies, guidelines and design framework, to design codes, masterplans and pattern books (Carmona et al. 2006; Cowan 2002; Punter and Carmona 1997). Depending on the characteristics or culture of a particular planning system (Friedmann 2005), a selection of such tools and mechanisms are employed to deliver design control. For instance, the United Kingdom (UK), follows a discretionary planning system, and relies mostly on guidelines and frameworks which provide design suggestions but do not specify design outcomes. In a regulatory system such as that in operation in the United States (US) – or, arguably, China – design outcomes are more explicitly defined through codes, by-laws and site masterplans (Punter 2007; Chen 2016).

Aesthetic control is a part of design control which deals with the external appearance and visual impact of development (Punter 1986, p. 351) and, as mentioned earlier, has a long tradition both in planning practice and scholarly research. For example, in the UK, aesthetic control has been exercised since the early twentieth century, while in the US it has been an essential part of planning approval since the 1930s (Cullingworth 1991). Many scholars have expressed the belief that aesthetic control should focus on the contextual responsiveness of buildings rather than the taste of individuals (Cullingworth 1991; Donovan and Larkham 1996; Orillard 2009). In practice, in many countries including China, aesthetics is often managed through a design review process involving urban professionals and political figureheads, and sometimes other stakeholders (Chen and White 2020; Cullingworth 1991; Punter 2003).

In March 2018, the State Council initiated a reorganisation of its administrative structure for urban planning, and the following year announced a plan to establish a new spatial planning system, expected to be fully functioning by 2035 (State Council of P.R.C. 2019). Regardless of this, the case studies discussed in the paper were delivered through the planning system legislated for in the *City and Rural Planning Act* 2008. This system features four tiers of urban plan: the masterplan of the city, the masterplan of the districts (only produced for large cities), the Detailed Development Control Plan of precincts (DDCP) and the Detailed Construction Plan of plots (DCP). Design issues could also be addressed in topic-specific plans for cities and their sub-regions, such as conservation plans and transportation plans. Together with numerous ordinances, by-laws, regulations, local advice, and notices from the relevant departments of the central, provincial and local governments, these plans functioned to regulate design outcomes (Chen 2016). In particular, the masterplans contained design policies, strategies and principles, the DDCPs offered detailed codes or indices as well as non-compulsory design guidance for the development of a precinct, and the DCPs delivered specific site plans after the funder and development needs were confirmed. This planning structure has been the basis for the shaping of the new spatial planning system in China, and therefore remains a focus of this paper’s discussion.

Creating the appropriate *feng mao* to tackle the identity crisis has been a critical objective in the urban plans of Chinese cities since the 1980s, along with rapid urbanisation fuelled by the country’s burgeoning market economy. Although the literature acknowledges the intangible aspects of a city’s *feng mao*, the intensive discussion has focused primarily on its physical elements, particularly those that can be codified or regulated in the legal plans (Yu and Zhou 2009; Duan et al. 2013). The city’s natural setting, which includes mountains and rivers, is often afforded high importance (Wang 2007), followed by landscape features in public spaces and architectural envelopes of buildings. Table 1 summarises the design elements typically covered in the hierarchy of urban plans in planning practice in China. The next section explains the methods employed in this research and its sources of information.

*Table 1: Urban elements commonly considered for design control with regards to urban images (adapted from (Duan et al. 2013, p. 29)).*

| Legal plan | Urban elements subject to control |
|------------|-----------------------------------|
|            | Natural elements and topography   |

|  |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| Urban Masterplan (at the city and district scale)  | Boundaries of perceptible districts  |
|  | Height limits zoning                 |
|  | Built-up density/intensity zoning    |
|  | Main viewpoints and visual corridors |
|  | Open space system                    |
|  | City's nightscape                    |
| Detailed Development Control Plan (DDCP) and Detailed Construction Plan (DCP) (at the precinct and site scale) | Building massing and envelope        |
|  | Building materials and colours       |
|  | Building roof types                  |
|  | Vegetation arrangement               |
|  | Signage and lighting                 |
|  | Furniture in public spaces           |

### Methodology

This research adopts a subcases-within-a-case approach, which is useful in identifying a range of phenomena of interest across all cases (Stake 2005; Yin 2009). This approach allows the investigation to be carried out at multiple scales, so that the impact of design control at a larger scale can be evidenced and understood at smaller scales. It first examines the SRS area as a whole at the urban scale, then a sub-area—a group of urban blocks in the northeast of the SRS area—at the district scale, and finally, two building sites located in the selected groups of urban blocks at the site scale. The selection of the subcases is determined mainly by their location (less central and more at the edge), construction status (a newly built area), and the availability of data.

The research is based on policy analysis, participant observation recorded in photographs, and semi-structured interviews. Content analysis was carried out on the series of design and planning documentation addressing the SRS area and its subareas, containing essential information on planning objectives and design control measures (Table 2). The author also conducted site observations in August 2016 and February 2018, to examine in situ the emerging urban images as construction progressed. These site observations paid particular attention to the design elements that the planning documents proposed, including axes, viewpoints, skylines and setbacks. Photographs were taken to record the visits, some of which are used in the present paper. In addition, in August 2016 the author conducted two semi-structured interviews with the urban designer who had been part of the Masterplan production team and the architect who had designed the two buildings on the selected sites. The interview questions for the urban designer focused on the design intention, as well as strategies of design control and how these were delivered in practice. The architect was then asked about the impact of design control on their specific project and the interaction among different stakeholders in the design process. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and each lasted about an hour. The author translated the quotations cited in the paper. The research obtained ethical clearance from the author's institution.

### The South Railway Station area development in Nanjing

Nanjing is the capital city of Jiangsu Province, 305 km to the west of Shanghai. Its metropolitan area is 6600 sq km, and includes the old walled city (the historic city wall has been partially demolished), surrounding urban areas, satellite towns and villages. In 2017 the total population was over eight million. Nanjing was an ancient capital throughout several imperial dynasties and also during republican China (1912–49). It enjoys a strategic location within the Yangtze River Delta and is home to one of the five railway stations along the express train line that connects Beijing and Shanghai. The South Railway Station, as its name suggests, is located to the south of the walled city, ten minutes' drive from the downtown area of Nanjing and 40 minutes' drive from Nanjing Lukou International Airport. The station also serves other express train lines in the Yangtze River Delta and connects with the downtown area via two underground lines. The research looked at the SRS area as a whole, and then a sub-area located to the northwest and two groups of buildings in the area at smaller scales.

Nanjing’s railway station was designed in 2006 as a national project by the Fourth China Railway Design Institute and Beijing Architectural Design and Research Institute, and has been in use since 2011. Its design incorporates the traditional timber structural element the ‘Chinese Order’ (*dou gong* brackets) despite being made of steel, as well as traditional window patterns and wooden texture to reflect its Chineseness (Figure 1). The station, however, is nothing like traditional Chinese buildings in terms of scale. It is the biggest station in Asia – 417 metres north to south, 450 metres east to west and 60 metres tall, with a construction area of 458,000 sq m, and it became a catalyst for further urbanisation of the surrounding area. The area covered by the Masterplan totals 6.03 sq km, as shown in Figure 3. The SRS area is mostly a new town, with only small patches of industrial land use and affiliated residential use before 2011. Covering the period from 2007 onwards a series of legal plans and urban design plans have been created for the area to deliver design controls (Table 2). The selected subcases are presented in Figure 2.

<insert Figure 1 here>

Figure 1: The design of the South Railway Station in Nanjing, incorporating a number of traditional Chinese architectural features, including the ‘Chinese Order’ and the wooden ceiling and window patterns. Photographed by the author in 2018.

<insert Figure 2 here>

Figure 2: The spatial configuration defined in the Urban Design Plan (2014) and DDCP (2014) of the SRS area which highlights the central axis, the urban interfaces and the viewpoints with their associated visual corridors. The sub-area and selected building sites are also marked. Produced by the author based on the DDCP 2014.

*Table 2: Legal plans and urban design plans for the case study area and the subcase, aimed at delivering design control*

| <b>Time</b>               | <b>Planning and design documents</b>   | <b>Authorship</b>   |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| <b>2007</b>               | Master Plan of Nanjing SRS area (covering land use, infrastructure, civic facilities and underground space planning, transportation planning, and the urban design of important nodes and districts) | Atkins, Transportation Planning Research Institute of Nanjing, Southeast University Urban Planning and Design Institute, The Urban Planning Bureau of Nanjing |
| <b>2010</b>               | Detailed Development Control Plan (DDCP) of the SRS area   | The Urban Planning Bureau of Nanjing  |
| <b>2011</b>               | Urban Design Plan of the central area of Southern New Town, Nanjing (the SRS area is part of the new town)   | The Urban Planning Bureau of Nanjing  |
| <b>Oct 2013- Sep 2014</b> | Urban Design Plan of the SRS area  | Nanjing University Construction Academy of Planning and Design, and Broadway Malyan (Shanghai), The Urban Planning Bureau of Nanjing                          |
| <b>May 2014</b>           | Adjusted DDCP of the South Station area (adjusted due to policy changes)   | Southeast University Urban Planning and Design Institute, Transportation Planning Research Institute of Nanjing, The Urban Planning Bureau of Nanjing         |
| <b>Mar 2016</b>           | Urban Design Plan of selected group of urban blocks  | PWL Partnership   |

*The SRS area*

Before the implementation of the DDCP (2014) some land parcels had already been sold to developers and were partially built upon. These were mostly located to the west and south of the station. Pre-existing factories with residential blocks for employees has been retained in the southeast corner of the area. The urban blocks selected as the subcase in this research had also been partially built before 2014. By mid-2019, approximately half of the planned areas were complete, an indication of the astonishing speed and scale of new town development in Nanjing.

The principal objective of the SRS area development as specified in the DDCP 2014 was to produce a 'magnificent iconic gateway' to Nanjing through employing appropriate urban images. The Urban Design Plan 2014 stressed design principles including compactness, human scale, safety, pedestrian-orientation and robustness. Concerning physical form, both documents specified a north-south-oriented central axis across the station building, a central 'contemporary building characteristic area' consisting of two rows of blocks accommodating mostly high-rise buildings, and two urban interfaces towards the ring road in the north and the new Qinhuai river in the south (Figure 2). The central axis was to be formed by a row of urban blocks (100 m x 250 m) dedicated to green spaces. The two rows of blocks were symmetrically positioned alongside the axis and merely for commercial use. Other urban blocks towards the eastern and western edges were to be larger than the central ones, and land uses were also diversified as distances from the central axis increased. The Urban Design Plan proposed that high-rise buildings should be over 100 metres tall in the blocks adjacent to the green space and over 60 metres tall in the next row (Figure 3). The station marked the north end of the axis, while a landmark building near the river marked its southern end. The landmark building was to be over 300 metres tall and visible even from the historic city (Ji and Duan 2016), a distance of over 10 km. In order to achieve the central axis, the design guidance provided in the DDCP 2014 stated that 60–80 per cent of the building façades facing the central green space should be built against the street line to form a street enclosure. The setbacks from the street line should be within three metres, while buildings in the other blocks that were away from the central axis could be set back by 15 metres. The DDCP also suggested five viewpoints, from which the roof of the station building should be visible along defined visual corridors. These viewpoints were: one from the bridge crossing the river, two flanking the central axis, and two on the ring road towards the station from west and east (Figure 2). The Plan also stated that any proposed new buildings in the area had to acknowledge these viewpoints and avoid blocking them (further discussion of this is presented in a later section).

<insert Figure 3 here>

Figure 3: The central axis as proposed in the SRS area Urban Design Plan, 2014 (Nanjing University Construction Academy of Planning and Design) and the site for the axis observed at the south end of the axis. (Photographed by the author in 2018)

The central axis was deemed necessary to 'connect' the SRS area with the historic city, the visible axes of which were always a crucial urban element in the imperial period (interview with the urban designer, Aug 2016). However, this proposed axis of the SRS area did not form a continuation of any of the historical axes but turned a considerable angle. Apart from its symbolic role, the central axis was intended to enhance the saleability of spaces in the adjacent high-rise commercial buildings, by elevating the spatial quality of the public green space nearby (Jiangsu.China.com.cn 2015).

The two urban interfaces alongside the ring road and the new Qinhuai river were also critical elements of the projected urban images. Not only did the plans suggest two viewpoints facing towards the interfaces, but also proposed a height restriction of 12 metres for buildings forming the skylines. In addition, 40–60 per cent of building fronts along the waterfront needed to be built up to the street lines to form the street enclosure. The Urban Design Plan 2014 also proposed a boulevard connecting the central park and the waterfront.

At the time of the author's visit to the site in early 2018, the land allocated to the central park had been cleared and some high-rise buildings along the axis were complete (Figure 3). Although the legal plans stressed street enclosure, the fact that the axis was over 150 metres wide (including the street space) meant

that at the street level, this was hardly likely to be achieved. Even though retaining the human scale was one of the design principles, the scale of the central axis clearly emphasised grandness, which was evident in the design rendering showing the axis from a bird's eye view (Figure 3). The station building, two kilometres away from the proposed viewpoint, could hardly be seen from the south end of the axis, even without any building blocking the view. In any case, it is likely that the views would be obstructed by trees after they were planted.

#### *The sub-area*

The DDCP and Urban Design Plan for the SRS area did not provide specific design conditions for the development of other urban blocks, apart from land use for all the sub-areas and height limits of the interfaces. The blocks around the edges of the selected sub-area were mostly designated for retail/office functions and community services. Residential land was arranged in the inner blocks, and as seen from the site visit these buildings were designed as standard apartment blocks to ensure speedy construction (Figure 4). In terms of building height control, the Urban Design Plan aimed to form a rhythmic skyline, stipulating that the western row of blocks should have a height restriction of 60-100 metres with 35-60 metres in the next row, and a 60-100 metre limit to the two rows in the east.

<insert Figure 4 here>

Figure 4: The contrast between standardised apartment buildings located in the inner urban blocks of the sub-area and the Himalaya commercial building designed by MAD, located in the 'contemporary building characteristic area'. The former incorporates little design innovation; For the urban designer and planner, it is thus inappropriate to be part of the projected urban images. (Photographed by the author, 2018)

By 2016, Vanke (one of the biggest residential developers in China) owned 14 out of 20 blocks in the sub-area. Vanke commissioned PWL Partnership, a Vancouver-based urban design firm, to produce an urban design plan for the entire sub-area, to showcase its vision to the local authority (interview with the architect, August 2016). PWL has an international reputation for producing high-quality public spaces for communities, which would put the developer in an advantageous position in the bidding. This urban design plan was not part of the legal plan, so its implementation could not be guaranteed. However, the architect interviewed as part of this study stated that 'the developer asked us to refer to PWL's urban design proposal for the design of our buildings and landscapes. It did help us decide on where we should position a corner square on the site' (interview with the architect, August 2016).

#### *The building sites within the sub-area*

This study further examined the buildings in the two urban blocks located on the north edge of the sub-area, to understand the effect of large-scale urban design control on individual sites. As mentioned above, the DDCP 2014 only regulated the land use and building height alongside the railway line. Nevertheless, the local planning bureau had verbally emphasised the importance of the aesthetic quality of this interface to the developer and the architects (interview with the architect, August 2016). The developer initially employed an international star architect – Spark Architects – to design the buildings in Block 01 and Block 02 (Figure 2). Taking inspiration from the railway lines, Spark Architects proposed a vertical wavy pattern on the glass curtain wall of the buildings (the building in the middle in Figure 5). The building in Block 02 was completed first, but the outcome was somewhat disappointing aesthetically as the construction details did not match the architect's conceptual drawings (interview with the architect, August 2016). The construction details were developed by a local design firm and the international architect was rarely involved at the construction stage. This type of 'co-production' between international and domestic design firms has been encouraged by China's government since the opening up of the country's design market to the world in 2001 (Ren 2011). Consequently, Spark's design of the buildings in Block 01 was abandoned and the design recommissioned to the Shanghai-based practice Dushe Design, together with the design of buildings in Block 03.

Nevertheless, Dushe architects were asked to adopt the vertical pattern in the new design of the building in Block 01 because, as explained by the architect, 'the pattern was already approved by the Mayor of Nanjing in the design review – so we couldn't make big changes but had to more or less follow the same direction'



(interview with the architect, August 2016) (Figure 5). Furthermore, the three buildings in Block 03 were designed in an L-shape with the longer side facing the railway to hide the residential buildings behind. According to the architect, this strategy 'was undernoted by the planning bureau, although we did not receive any written document suggesting this' (interview with the architect, August 2016) (Figure 5). The standardised residential buildings in the adjacent blocks were considered 'inappropriate' for the 'magnificent iconic gateway' that the SRS development intended to achieve (as specified in the plans). This notion was ensured in the land use strategy in the aforementioned legal plans, which positioned the residential land use in blocks away from all urban interfaces. Ironically, the upper levels of the three buildings in Block 03 contain small units, purposefully designed to be functionally convertible between living and working (*gong yu*) spaces. According to the architect, this was to fulfil the land use requirement of design control (commercial use) and market demand (presumably residential): 'Vanke believed that office units were over-supplied in the South Station area, so they wanted to do these small convertible units for a quick sale. They can be converted to residential use after completion check by the authorities' (interview with the architect, August 2016). These small units, *gong yu*, are not unique to this project but are also widely produced in other cities (Yang, 2013). However, as living units they are not adequately serviced with kitchens and utility spaces, and unlike the owners of apartments sited on residential land, potential owners would not be entitled to access local schools or other social services. Moreover, because of the classification of the land use as commercial, ownership of *gong yu* lasts only for 40 years rather than the 70 years provided to owners of residential land.

Indeed, the area allocated to commercial land use would possibly exceed market demand in the SRS area, as the blocks along the central axis, in the 'contemporary building characteristic area' and along the two designated urban interfaces were all designated for commercial use. Furthermore, the legal plans allowed buildings on the commercial land to be of a highest density and height. As Bloomberg News (2019) reported, in the first half of 2019, 21.5% of office space in 17 major Chinese cities stood empty, a situation contributed to by the economic slowdown, supply glut and trade war (Bloomberg News 2019). Nanjing faced the same challenge, as the vacancy rate of office spaces increased from 13% in 2017 to 29.9% in 2019, according to the report by Cushman & Wakefield (2020). Arguably, the oversupply of office space was also a result of planning decisions, as this case study shows. It is a shared belief among professionals in China that magnificent urban images can only be achieved by office/commercial buildings, while residential buildings are standardised with little room for design innovation.

<insert Figure 5 here>

Figure 5: Group of buildings, deliberately designed to form an urban interface along the express railway line to hide the residential buildings behind. Spark designed the lower building in the middle. A requirement of the design plan was that the façade pattern was reflected in the design of the building on the right (Rendering by Dushe Design, 2016).

### **Discussion and conclusions**

The research revealed that the SRS development utilised various strategies for place promotion, such as landmark public space and buildings, star architects, and images referring to the past and the future (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2014). These strategies were orchestrated through design control at multiple levels.

The planned images produced in the cases included a central axis, made up of a large urban park flanked by commercial high-rise buildings. They also showed two landmark buildings (including the station itself) along the axis, a series of viewpoints and associated visual corridors, and designated urban interfaces with landscape features and proposed skylines. The grand central axis adheres to a design strategy that has a long tradition in Chinese planning culture, with, since the imperial period, the ideal city being a cosmological symbol of the emperor's regime, featuring a central axis across the palace complex, highlighted by a broad street flanked by governmental and ritual buildings (Sit 2010; Steinhardt 1990). Although the urban blocks in imperial cities were much larger in size overall (e.g. 558 metres in the central row and 1128 metres at the edge in Chang'an in the 580s), this morphological norm was readily applied in the SRS area to showcase its importance as the 'iconic gateway' of Nanjing. The design intention was to join the axis of the SRS area with

the historical axes which once existed in the old city, even though they did not align. To reflect on the traditional cosmology, the central axis in imperial cities was viewed mainly from on high. This bird's eye view was featured in the design representation of the Urban Design Plan 2014 (Figure 4).

In terms of the design control tools, land use planning, development intensity regulations, height limits and building setbacks, restrictions were evident in the planning documents examined in the research, and not all the design elements shown in Table 1 were covered. For instance, there was no control of elements such as building envelopes, massing or roof types, while urban interfaces were addressed by controlling the building heights and street setbacks. In fact, examination of the two building clusters by the railway line revealed how the architect, developer and regulator, in the absence of specific written codes and guidance, had actively colluded to shape the urban interfaces. It could be argued that this control was achieved informally, and that through design reviews, the political figurehead also had a role in determining what image should be produced. The cases revealed distinct Chineseness in the design control approaches and outcome, namely, the central axis, cultural symbols from the Chinese tradition, political influence, and the stress on non-residential buildings. These particularities reflected local social relationships rather than merely being where 'global economic forces' played out (Lovering 2007, p. 359; McGrew 1992).

The research noted several problems associated with image-oriented planning practice. Firstly, the proposed five viewpoints and visual corridors could be said to constitute mere wishful thinking on the part of the designers, due to the massive scale they intended to respond to, with no specific measure to ensure implementation of the design at the construction stage. Furthermore, visitors would approach the city from numerous directions and view the city from both outside and within, meaning that the intended effect of the designated viewpoints could not be assured.

Secondly, the aim of the proposed landmark building – over 300 metres high – was to project a hypermodern image (Go and Govers 2010), but, as argued in the literature, this image was to enhance marketability purposes rather than to provide an accurate representation of social meaning. The same can be said of the façade design of the buildings alongside the train line which aimed to celebrate the technological advancement of the express railway. These deliberately hid the everyday life of residents, considered by designers and planners as inappropriate for the new city and unlikely to attract the investors' gaze, a notion which echoes the literature about the 'paradigm city' in China. The research thus questions the authenticity of the images, which sanitised daily life for promotion and marketing purposes (Boland 2013). Furthermore, with the creation of this new image the local authority now had possession of impressive materials by which to demonstrate its 'effective' governance, an important message for them to convey to visitors and speculators.

Thirdly, the case study demonstrated that image construction had been prioritised over the functional demands of the market. Commercial buildings – for example, offices and shops – were preferred in representations of the SRS area, indicated by the fact that they were found to incorporate more design features than the residential buildings (Figure 6). In the plans, these commercial buildings were proposed to form the central axis and urban interfaces. Developers needed to manipulate the land use designated in the design control regulations to fulfil market demand by producing the functionally vague *gong yu* units. This phenomenon indicated the extent to which entrepreneurial forms of urban governance (Hall and Hubbard 1996, 1998; Hubbard 1996) are embedded in top-down place-making in contemporary China. It also revealed, through the resourceful tactics of the developer, the resistance of the market actor to meeting their interests.

Lastly, the research considered an essential concern of place promotion through image building, namely its impact on urban identity and place identity. On the one hand, as rooted in the tradition, Nanjing's central axis was mainly a political symbol. On the other, the images related to traditional architecture were mostly decorative and out of scale. It was unclear at this stage whether they would be able to facilitate a sense of place for the area's new citizens and ensure long-term liveability (Mavromatidis 2010; McCarthy 2005, 2006). As argued by Lewicka (2011), this type of image is likely to appeal merely to social elites, while ignoring the

needs of ordinary citizens. It is worth noting here that identity is a social construct, embodying people's self-recognition and an expression of linkage to others and the society in which they exist (Hogg and Abrams 1988; Jenkins 1996). To achieve place identity, the physical environment therefore needs to offer opportunities for activities and social interaction (Scannell and Gifford 2010; Watson and Bentley 2007). Everyday spaces, social activities and engaged residents are the key ingredients of identity building. It is the life behind the images and the supporting urban morphology—culturally familiar building types, livable streets and public spaces for everyday life—that matter. In this research, however, the case studies have shown that these were not emphasised sufficiently in the planning and design of the SRS area.

This study argues, therefore, that design control and planning need to go beyond image building and embrace a number of urban design principles to promote 'good design' for the broader public interest. For instance, consideration should be given to providing accessible, human-scale community green spaces, instead of creating a grand central park. The ecological principles can also be embedded in the provision of green spaces. Specific planning incentives (Barnett 1974) could be employed to improve the design quality of residential buildings, instead of hiding them away. Also, while in the case of the SRS area the plans stressed the importance of street enclosure (in the regulations on building setbacks), they could also have employed measures to enhance pedestrian and cycling experiences. In order to go beyond image building, design control in planning needs to pay more attention to culturally-rooted spatial typologies in the region, such as street networks, neighbourhood patterns, community spaces, and street-level mixed use development. Traditional typologies do not only encapsulate cultural symbols, but also support social production of everyday practice (Chen and Thwaites 2013). They allow spontaneous urban activities to occur from the bottom up and sustain urban dynamics for socially meaningful place-making. In other words, to address the identity crisis of Chinese cities, it is not sufficient merely to focus on images or *feng mao* – planning practice must pay attention to the social spaces and people.

It is challenging for urban governance to shift its focus from creating a 'paradigm city' to one of equality and liveability, but it is imperative to try. Sense of place should be foregrounded in design control in China, particularly in new town development. This research provides significant lessons for other new towns as they are constructed at an unprecedented speed, with many already suffering from decline or even deserted (Shepard 2015; Xinhua Daily Telegraph 2016). As Song et al. (2020, 5178) argued, local government entrepreneurialism should be scrutinised, as it often adopts a growth-at-all-costs approach to obtaining land-leasing revenue and enhancing its political performance. Such a mindset can lead to overdevelopment, overspending, misallocation of social resources and low development quality, and harm a city's long-term sustainability.

As the study area is currently under construction, it would be useful to revisit the area after a decade or two to assess the social impact of the image-oriented planning measures adopted in SRS, particularly with regards to the issue of place identity.

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