

## Urban Development Issues in China's Cities: Part Four

### Major projects improve the urban landscape without benefiting the average inhabitant

“Who is the National Grand Theatre for?”

Source: *Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan*, (Lifeweek), No. 9, 2007

Abstract: A photographer recently published an article after visiting the narrow alley, or *hutong* in Beijing where the new National Grand Theatre now stands. With its silvery, luminescent roof, the building provides an impressive contrast to the surrounding historical neighbourhood. These older streets – a rich repository of local culture – are now prey to this imposing new urban monster.

This incisive article takes an ironic look at the relationship between this kind of large-scale project and the cultural side of daily life for the average city dweller. The Chinese Ministry of Culture established the National Grand Theatre commission in 1958, but until the 1990's, plans to build the theatre remained only on paper. Investment in the National Grand Theatre has since reached 2.7 billion yuan (approximately €270 million), and further investment totalling 300 million (€29 million) is expected. As major projects of this kind always stir up public opinion, several questions arose in this case: would this theatre, built with taxpayers' money, be accessible to all? Was this a profit-oriented, or public-interest project? As yet, no one has provided a definitive answer to this question.

Two other major issues concern theatre programming and expenditure for the long-term maintenance of the building. Should the National Grand Theatre for example be an impressive showcase for the arts, or offer eclectic programming to suit a wide variety of tastes? The answer to that depends on what audience is being targeted. According to provisional estimates, maintenance costs could range from over a dozen million yuan (millions of euros) to hundreds of millions (approximately €10 million), which leads to the question of funding sources. Because patronage is uncommon in China, the main source of funding for the theatre will come from the government and operating revenue. In light of this, will the theatre be able to offer lower ticket prices? It is essential that a globally satisfying price scale be developed in order to preserve the soul and vitality of the National Grand Theatre.

[End]

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