

Laying Foundations for the Modernization of Urban Planning as a Discipline: East German Expert Hermann Rader in China (1957-1958)

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Abstract: The lecture series delivered by East German expert Hermann Rader at Tongji University from 1957 to 1958 represents a valuable case of international planning knowledge transfer in the early modernization of urban planning in China. Drawing on extensive primary materials from the Archives of Bauhaus University Weimar and other archival institutions, this paper systematically reviews the origins, content, and academic impact of Rader's lectures in China. Although the lectures were hosted by universities, their influence extended far beyond teaching. By introducing rigorous historical, theoretical, and scientific methodologies, Rader profoundly influenced and shaped the academic paths of Chinese urban planning scholars such as Dong Jianhong, Ruan Yisan, and Geng Yuxiu. Through planning practices in Shanghai and Hefei, the lectures also contributed to the formation of the Hefei Model, which integrated international experience with local realities. They thus left a lasting imprint on the modernization and localization of urban planning in China. The teaching and exchanges of foreign urban planning experts in the early PRC were not a simple one-way transmission of knowledge; they constituted a process of two-way empowerment and showed a dual, interactive mechanism of influence.

Keywords: history of urban planning; urban planning education; transfer of planning knowledge; Germany; history of urban construction; principles of urban planning

Urban planning in China has made a distinctive contribution to the country's historical course of modernization and has actively guided the modernization of Chinese urban development [1]. As the first Chinese university to establish an urban planning program, Tongji University focused on national development while keeping close contact with global theoretical movements. It formed an innovative academic community, an international atmosphere, and a tolerant intellectual tradition, becoming a concentrated reflection of modern Chinese urban planning history [2].

Tongji's early programs were taught by German teachers and used German academic systems, German-language teaching materials, and German instruction. After the nationwide reorganization of universities in 1952, civil engineering and architecture departments from more than ten institutions in East China were merged into Tongji, strengthening its planning and architecture faculty and forming a diversified academic style [3]. The official establishment of the urban planning program then clarified professional connotations and consolidated the foundation for the rapid development of planning after reform and opening up [4].

The period from 1952 to 1959 was a formative stage for Tongji's planning education. It coincided with the start of large-scale urban construction in China, allowing education and planning practice to be closely connected. During this period, Chinese scholars trained in major countries and foreign experts from the Soviet Union and East Germany came to lecture, enriching the intellectual and cultural resources of urban planning education. East German expert Hermann Rader's teaching at Tongji is a typical case. His two courses, History of European Urban Construction and Principles of Urban Planning, had a major influence on the development of the discipline. Although employed by Tongji, his advisory work also affected urban planning and construction in Shanghai, Hefei, and other cities.

Many basic facts about Rader's technical assistance in China have remained unclear: why he came to China, what his educational and professional background was, what planning ideas he advocated, why different accounts date his arrival to 1956, 1957, or 1958 [5-8], how long he worked in China, and what influence he had on urban planning as a discipline. Based on oral-history interviews with senior planners, archival work, and

materials collected during overseas research [9], this paper seeks to clarify these historical facts and contribute to the study of Chinese planning history and Tongji's planning education.

The historical investigation of Rader's lectures can proceed at two levels. One is to clarify basic historical facts and evaluate their value and influence. The other is to study, from the history of planning ideas, how his teaching shaped modern Chinese planning concepts and how planning knowledge circulated between China and East Germany and was localized in China. This paper focuses mainly on the first level; the second will be discussed separately.

1 Origins of East German expert Rader's lectures in China

Rader came to China largely because of the historical construction of Tongji's urban planning discipline and the mechanisms of international cultural exchange at that time. In 1952, after the national reorganization of universities, Tongji formed an architecture department by incorporating faculty from several institutions and took the lead in establishing the urban construction and management program, the predecessor of urban planning. In 1956, it applied to the Ministry of Education to admit students formally under the name urban planning, marking a new stage of disciplinary development [10].

Against the background of comprehensive learning from the Soviet Union, Tongji first requested Soviet planning experts to support disciplinary construction. The Ministry of Education sent a Soviet expert to Tongji, but Feng Jizhong and Jin Jingchang found that the professional match was poor because the expert was primarily in road engineering [11]. Tongji therefore decided to invite an East German urban planning expert to lecture.

The request for an East German expert was closely connected with Tongji's German academic origins and with early PRC exchanges with socialist countries. In September and October 1956, the Architectural Society of China sent a delegation led by Liang Sicheng to East Germany [12], and Jin Jingchang, then director of Tongji's urban planning teaching and research group, participated and took numerous photographs [13]. In April and May 1957, an East German delegation of architects visited China [14], and Jin received East German experts at Tongji [5]. Having studied and worked in Germany from 1938 to 1946, Jin was familiar with German planning. The renewed Sino-German academic exchanges in 1956-1957 deepened his understanding and prompted his proposal to invite a German expert. Rader, then teaching at the University of Weimar, was one of the scholars Jin respected most.

2 Rader's educational background and professional experience

Hermann Rader was born on July 6, 1917, in Germany. His educational path and work experience connected architecture, urban design, and planning practice. He studied and worked in the German academic environment before and after the Second World War and later taught at Weimar. His professional experience included urban design, architecture, and construction projects in East Germany, which gave him both theoretical breadth and practical familiarity. The Weimar school, with its links to the Bauhaus tradition, provided the intellectual environment for his later teaching.

Rader's designs included city squares, cultural buildings, and urban construction projects, including works in Suhl. His career combined historical understanding, design training, and planning practice, which explains why his lectures in China were able to cover both European urban history and practical planning principles [15].



Fig. 1 East German expert Hermann Rader studying urban planning and design schemes with his colleagues in the 1960s.



Fig. 2 Rader's design for the October 7th Cultural Center in Suhl.

3 Rader's experience in technical assistance in China

Existing literature has offered insufficient information on the dates of Rader's visits. Archival materials preserved at Bauhaus University Weimar show that he visited China twice. His 1957 summary report states that he stayed from May 24 to December 17, 1957, and that Feng Jizhong and Jin Jingchang's accurate translation greatly helped him enter work quickly [16]. In his 1958 report, he noted that a second visit was proposed to continue teaching courses not fully completed in 1957 and 1958 [17].

On October 29, 1957, Tongji submitted a request to the Ministry of Higher Education to adjust Rader's lecture schedule and suggested that he stay for another academic term and be transferred to work at Tongji [18]. The ministry replied to Tongji and Tsinghua, agreeing that two experts should return to China in December and continue work in April and August 1958 [19]. Rader's first lecture tour thus ended on December 13, 1957, when Tongji's planning teachers saw him off at Shanghai airport.

According to Rader's 1958 summary report, he and Stefan Okrzeja arrived in China on April 26, 1958. They visited cities in Germany, France, Britain, and Southeast Asia on the way, reached Guangzhou on September 29, and later visited several Chinese cities. Since November 18, he continued to teach at Tongji while also supporting Hefei in formulating an urban plan. This itinerary shows that his work was a combined program of teaching, investigation, and planning consultation.

4 Main contents of Rader's teaching and exchange work in China

4.1 Support for the construction of Tongji's urban planning discipline

Rader's work first served the disciplinary construction of Tongji's urban planning program. His lectures offered systematic historical knowledge, theoretical concepts, and planning methods, and his work with teachers and students connected classroom teaching with project practice. Tongji's letters of thanks emphasized that his courses broadened the horizons of faculty and students and provided guidance for curriculum design, graduation design, and planning practice [20-21].



Fig. 3 Rader instructing Tongji teachers and students on revising an urban planning scheme, 1958.



Fig. 4 Letters of thanks from Tongji students, advanced-study fellows, and relevant institutions to Rader, December 1958.

4.2 Special course I: History of European Urban Construction

History of European Urban Construction was one of Rader's two main courses at Tongji. The notes were printed by the urban planning teaching and research group and became an important reference for later learning [24]. The course introduced European urban development from antiquity to modern times, emphasizing the relation between historical change, urban form, social organization, and planning thought. It helped Chinese students understand the logic of city building beyond engineering technique. The course also provided comparative materials for Chinese planning education. It traced classical European urban forms, medieval cities, Renaissance planning, Baroque urban space, garden cities, satellite towns, and modern urban construction, giving Chinese students a long historical perspective on urban form and planning systems.

4.3 Special course II: Principles of Urban Planning

Principles of Urban Planning was taught by Rader at Tongji from the summer semester of 1957. In his summary, Rader explained that the course used drawings to clarify problems in contemporary urban construction practice and theory. It addressed the special conditions created by socialist industrialization in Chinese urban development, and discussed sociology, economics, technology, urban construction elements, urban structure, planning methods, urban analysis, urban morphology, scale, residential areas, housing, and transportation functions [16].

Although no complete text of the lecture notes has yet been found, the illustrated volume preserved with the course helps reveal its content [25]. The image numbers show that Rader taught twelve lectures, but the first two may have been theoretical discussions without illustrations. The third lecture analyzed the development of inner-city areas in Central European cities, compared Warsaw and Nuremberg, showed the street plans of the city in 1840 and 1941, displayed an aerial photograph of central Shanghai, and used Suhl's theory and practice as examples. The later illustrations covered work-residence relations, urban functions, commuting, green systems, neighborhood-unit radius, and a Berlin planning proposal.

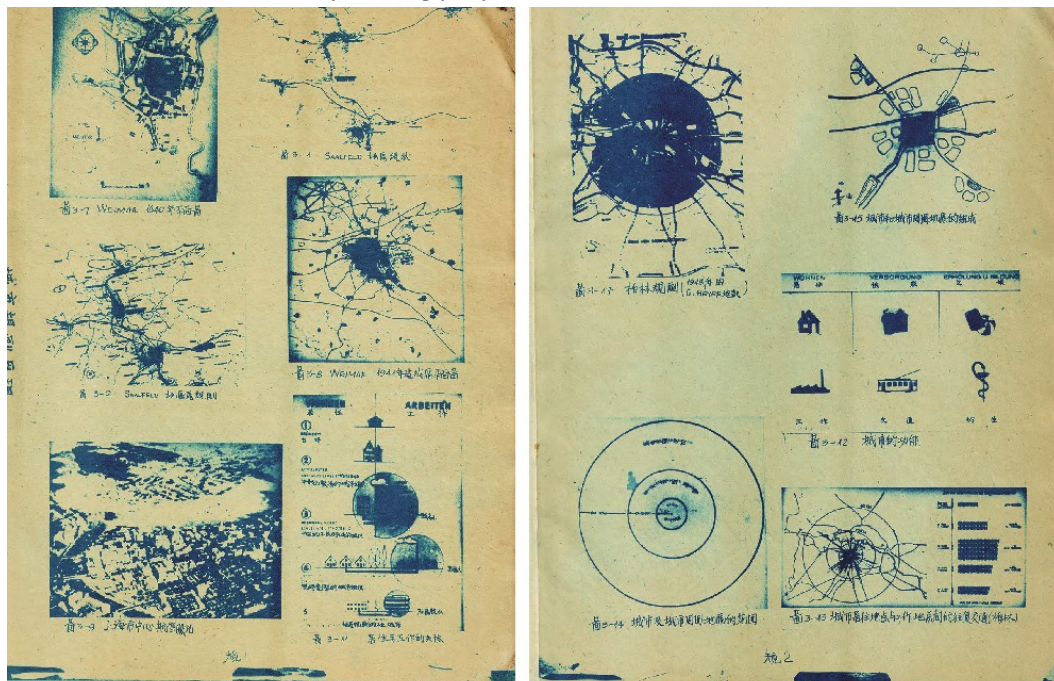


Fig. 5 The first two main-text pages of Rader's lecture notes for Principles of Urban Planning.

Rader's teaching paid close attention to urban transportation. In a lecture delivered on June 25, 1957, later published in the Journal of Tongji University in 1958, he argued that urban planning was the science of handling urban spatial problems and that the essence of planning was to solve people's problems in three-dimensional space. He stressed that traffic should serve urban functions and should not dominate the city; in a socialist city, transportation is an important issue precisely because people must remain the center [26].

4.4 Other exchanges: guidance for planning work in Shanghai, Jiangxi, and Hefei

Tongji's urban planning education emphasized truth seeking and teaching for social service. Rader's planning subjects therefore included real projects and practical opportunities. During his first visit in 1957, he guided a representative small-scale planning project in Shanghai's Dalian West Road area, which was completed jointly by the Shanghai Urban Planning and Design Institute and Tongji University. The scheme focused on adapting

residential orientation to local water networks, reorganizing transport routes, and building pedestrian-accessible living-service units. It was an early and useful exploration of neighborhood planning in China.

During his second visit in 1958, Rader went to Guangzhou and Jiangxi, then returned to guide Tongji teachers and students in rapid planning practice [22]. In October 1958 he gave detailed guidance on Hefei's master plan, using one of five terrain maps provided by Jin Jingchang. He prepared several colored schemes overnight and discussed them with the Hefei planning team the next day. The final plan used a fan-shaped structure, retained existing field patterns, made use of monsoon winds, expanded the city in three directions, and connected with old districts through green wedges and an ecological spatial pattern [28-30].



Fig. 6 Hefei urban plan proposed by Rader in 1958.

5 Influence of Rader's lectures on the development of Chinese urban planning

5.1 Profoundly shaping the academic paths of Dong Jianhong, Ruan Yisan, Geng Yuxiu and other first-generation Chinese planners

During Rader's teaching at Tongji, the audience included students and teachers at Tongji, local planning and design institute staff, and teachers from other institutions. His lectures were edited and printed for wider circulation, which helped extend their impact beyond the classroom [22]. Dong Jianhong's career offers a clear example. From 1959, he prepared China Urban Construction, opened a course in urban construction history at Tongji, and later published the textbook, which became one of the foundational works of urban planning education in China [31]. His long-term attention to foreign urban construction history was closely connected with the influence of Rader's historical teaching.

Ruan Yisan was deeply inspired by Rader's historical perspective and conservation awareness. In later interviews, he recalled the impact of hearing the history of European urban construction and visiting Suzhou and other historical cities. His later work in old-city conservation, Pingyao, Lijiang, and many historical-cultural city projects can be understood in relation to this early exposure to historical urbanism [33-36]. Geng Yuxiu also absorbed Rader's emphasis on history and theory and became an important organizer and author in the field of urban planning management [37].

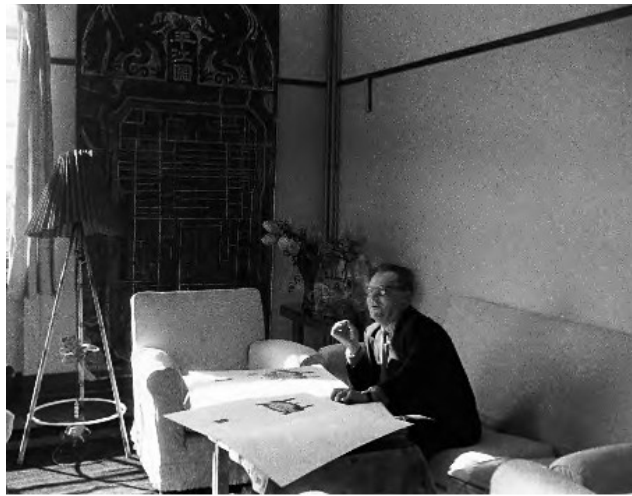


Fig. 7 Rader specially photographed with the Pingjiang Map stele hanging in his residence, 1957.

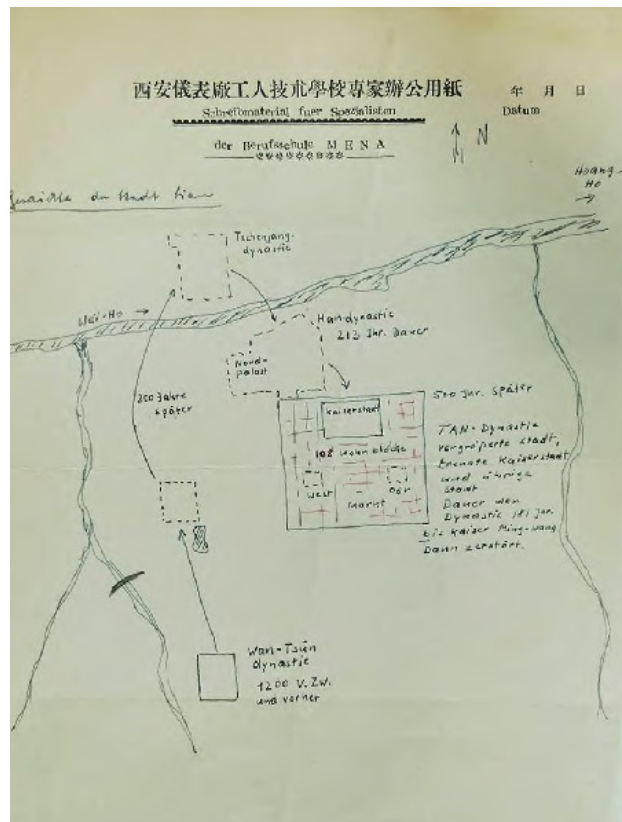


Fig. 8 Rader's historical notes on the ancient Chinese city of Xi'an.

5.2 Injecting a strong historical and theoretical foundation into Chinese urban planning and opening a window onto international planning

Tongji University was one of the most important platforms for Chinese planning education. After the 1952 departmental adjustment, it gathered leading teachers such as Jin Jingchang, Zhong Yaohua, Li Dehua, and Dong Jianhong. Rader's lectures in 1957-1958 gave Tongji's planning teaching another platform and made history and theory mutually supporting. His courses in European urban construction history and urban planning principles became precious assets of early planning education.

From the perspective of the international situation in the 1950s, East Germany belonged to the socialist camp and also maintained a distinct academic tradition different from Soviet experience. Its planning theory and urban construction practice offered Chinese planners another set of references. This was especially important for Tongji, which had a German intellectual heritage, and it helped the university maintain a leading position in planning education and academic development.

5.3 Playing an important guiding role in planning practice for key cities and helping create the Hefei Model of modern Chinese urban planning

Rader's influence was not limited to teaching. His guidance for Shanghai, Jiangxi, and Hefei introduced international planning perspectives into practical city planning. In Hefei, his proposal responded to local terrain, climate, and landscape conditions and used a fan-shaped layout, ecological green wedges, and differentiated districts to avoid the monotonous expansion of a pancake city [28-30]. Later literature often identifies the Hefei Model as a flexible design and creative planning approach led by specific planning ideas [40-41].

The Dongde, or East German, planning and urban-construction cultural tradition introduced through Rader helped Tongji planning maintain a reflective attitude toward Soviet experience. This enriched Chinese planning's intellectual sources and influenced Tongji's unique role during the early development of urban planning in the PRC.

6 Reflections and implications

6.1 The dual influence mechanism of foreign lectures by urban planning experts

Rader's lectures and exchanges in China deeply influenced Chinese urban planning scholars, the planning discipline, and planning practice. They also influenced Rader himself. Before coming to China, he had recognized that Chinese urban planners should avoid uncritically accepting Soviet planning theory and should strengthen research links with universities. After returning to Germany, his papers on socialist urban transformation emphasized cooperation between universities and cities and the role of higher education in socialist urban restructuring [42-44].

This shows that foreign experts' lectures were not a one-way transfer of knowledge. New China provided a vast experimental field for foreign experts, with strong governmental will, concentrated resources, large-scale construction demand, and complex practical conditions. These conditions allowed them to test the feasibility and effectiveness of planning theories while Chinese planners selectively absorbed, transformed, and localized foreign knowledge. The interaction formed a dual and reciprocal mechanism of influence.

6.2 The significance of transnational knowledge transfer in urban planning

Under the early PRC context of broad learning from Soviet planning experience, Rader's lectures and consultations at Tongji offer a distinctive example. They vividly demonstrate international academic exchange among planners and the interaction between foreign knowledge and Chinese practical experience. This case shows that promoting the internationalization of planning education and strengthening international cooperation can improve the quality of planning education, cultivate high-level planning professionals, and support the development of cities and planning disciplines.

6.3 Rethinking the sources of early PRC urban planning theory

Early PRC planning practice was mainly influenced by Soviet theory, but within this dominant stream, German, East German, Czech, Romanian, and other planning ideas also circulated in China and shaped planning heritage. The sources of early Chinese socialist planning theory should not be simplified as a Soviet model. A more

complex picture is necessary, one that recognizes the interaction and integration among different socialist countries and between foreign knowledge and Chinese realities.

Reexamining this history also requires understanding the positions and emotions of Chinese planners at the time. Many had studied or worked abroad, were committed to national construction, and sought to speak rationally and professionally under difficult political conditions. The historical mirror provided by Rader's case reminds us to preserve and interpret the voices of urban planners with professional knowledge and practical experience.

6.4 The candid voice of urban planners under special historical conditions

When Rader came to China for the second time in September 1958, the political campaign of the Great Leap Forward was reaching its peak. Urban planning work expanded under many bold slogans and rapid planning demands. Although Rader was an outsider, his words and conduct were closely watched. As an observer, he could see the enthusiasm and blindness of planning practice at that time and, from his statements, he appears to have participated actively in Chinese planning work.

At the same time, his later reflections show that he maintained professional judgment and rational concern. Faced with political campaigns, he did not simply oppose or endorse, but raised professional questions from the perspective of urban planning knowledge. Such judgment was difficult yet valuable. It reflects the capacity of planners to retain rational thinking and professional criticism in a special historical moment.

The case of Rader thus provides a historical lens for understanding planning knowledge transfer, disciplinary modernization, and intellectual agency in early PRC urban planning. It also reminds contemporary planning scholars to study the global circulation of planning thought together with local institutional and practical conditions.

Notes

① The name of this program is mainly based on the transcripts of Zhang Youliang and Bao Haihan, members of Tongji University's first class of planning graduates, and on Jin Jingchang's 1952 diary. This is a conservative account and is not discussed in detail here; it will be examined separately.

② In a self-criticism document handwritten by Jin Jingchang on May 30, 1968, titled *An Account of the Adverse Influence I Exerted on the Urban Planning Program and Teaching and Research Office*, he reviewed fourteen important events in Tongji's urban planning discipline. Item 11 stated that after Rader came to Tongji, he further systematized revisionist urban planning theory, and that Jin's own earlier training was similar, so he helped disseminate that mistaken planning theory. Provided by Jin Hua.

③ In his lectures at Tongji, Rader discussed structure and architectural plan through an example from his hometown, Nördlingen. He noted that the church acted as the dominant element and that the streets were oriented toward it, forming growth around it. This passage comes from the notes on *History of European Urban Construction*.

④ The biographical information cited here also refers to materials from the Digital Portrait Archive. Rader died in November 1984. The information derives from the German National Library; see <http://www.digiporta.net/index.php?id=270974189>.

⑤ The numbers in parentheses are the image numbers in the illustrated volume of *Principles of Urban Planning*. To avoid confusion with the figures in this paper, the word *Figure* from the original image numbers has been omitted below.

⑥ The article carried a final note stating that it was an academic lecture delivered by the expert on June 25, 1957, at the Department of Architecture, Tongji University, with oral interpretation by Professor Jin Jingchang

and notes compiled by He Maoyu, Li Xiran, Huang Fuming, and Deng Shuping. We thank Professor Li Baihao for providing this document.

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