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UNDERSTANDING THEMED CHINA:
BUILT PROJECTIONS OF IDENTITY IN THE EAST AND WEST

INTRODUCTION

China's accelerated development into modernity in the late-twentieth century brought with it changes in built form at an unprecedented scope, scale, and speed. As the country accumulated massive capital and wealth in a matter of a generation, it increasingly found itself relying on foreign skill to design and plan its new metropolises. Further, as its education system develops, elite Chinese students continue to travel to western universities for training before returning to China, transferring Western knowledge onto Eastern landscapes.

In the resulting absence of a coherent Chinese architecture, the country resorts to historical trope in projecting its identity on the built environment. Less a vernacular style than a pastiche, Chinese architecture is often conceived as temple gates, sweeping gable roof lines, punchy red and yellows, and dragon grotesques arranged in pavilion-courtyard plans. While based in some degree of historical reality, the tendency towards these characteristics overemphasizes religious and civic structures and severely limits critical investigation into what a contemporary Chinese architecture could become to reflect the country's newfound presence on the world stage. In this way, the entire culture's built history reduced to theming, presenting a two-dimensional reading of Chinese history while ignoring the increasingly cosmopolitan, urban, and global nature of its contemporary built form.

This paper will examine various cases of this "Themed China" to deduce how identity is projected through the built form in this void of a coherent architecture. For the sake of brevity, the case studies will focus on high-capital corporate projects, in which the weight of neoliberal power structures wield significant influence onto large populations via conscious and deliberate design choices. Additionally, the nature of these case studies and the resulting discussion is highly speculative and intended to only describe phenomena, not theorize on them. The case studies will run along a chronology along China's three phases of modernity: Republican China, Maoist China, and Neoliberal China.

BACKGROUND

Architectural design is intrinsically tied to the historical evolution of the society in which it is located and its political, economic, and intellectual institutions. China's dearth of a contemporary architecture is thus linked to a broader history of intellectual change within the state. More so, China's specific intellectual history differs from the model of European histories that would produce modernity's most persuasive, powerful, and affective architectures, creating skewed hierarchies of influence against the development of a contemporary Chinese architecture.

As China has navigated dynastic and revolutionary change, the process of historical revision and reinterpretation has been a central force in determining an ideological basis for a national architecture. One of the central difficulties in organizing a Chinese cultural history was the tradition by historians of the empires of setting the start of a political reign from Year Zero and suppressing pervious histories according to the will of their employers (Shiqiao, 2002). Further, these

historians were tasked with recording biographical details of their individual employers rather than observing broader societal occurrences. This lack of objectivity neutered any chance for a cannon of cultural history, affecting the ability of modern China to build a classical state.

By the end of the Qing dynasty and the inception of Republican China, the state was fully confronted by the power structures of the Imperial West. The late Qing dynasty had begun a policy of "self-strengthening", in part including sending Chinese pupils to study in America and Europe (Shiqiao, 2002). The foundational Chinese architectural historian Liang Sicheng was among the first Chinese students to study architecture in America, and he would go on to found two of China's earliest departments of architecture at National Northeastern University in Shenyang and Tsinghua University in Beijing. He is viewed as responsible for two major moments in Chinese architectural history: proliferating Bahaus and Beaux-Arts traditions in his departments, and developing a Chinese Order in the model of the classical architecture tradition.

Though of fundamental importance in the void of Chinese cultural history, Liang Sicheng's work would develop a model for a vernacular Chinese architecture within the Western tenants of Vitruvian theory. This structuring of architectural theory around Western canon put a premium on Western design educations and confounded Eastern attempts at nationalist architectures via the production of inherently imperialist designs. The resulting identity crisis left the state in an architectural vacuum through the twentieth century, leading directly to the phenomenon of the built form of contemporary urbanization.

CASE STUDIES

The 1933 Chicago World's Fair

In the West, Orientalism developed out of a fascination with the exotic Other, perpetuated by industrial processes generating both new middle classes with disposable incomes and cheap construction and production techniques. The concept of theming as it is understood today was developed in the world of industrial leisure, in which fairs like the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London utilized exoticized displays to bridge instruction-amusement-commerce divides (Coons, 2015). Susan Ingram describes these presentations as "all instructional, offering forms of what would become increasingly sought after knowledge about far-away places, while at the same time amusing through difference and spectacle" (2003a, 144). In this way, the Industrial Order fostered positivity towards its worldview among the urbanized populations who suffered from the situations it produced.

This use of theming as propaganda would diffuse over iterations of fairs as vendors discovered exoticism's profitability not solely in industrial messaging but also in sensationalism itself. Ingram describes of later world's fairs, "The increasing dominance of the midway zones would lead one to believe that the world exhibitions seem to have been less about forming citizenries than they were about opening up new markets or forming new customers" (2003b, 89). In this way, theming was commoditized by offering itself for sale independent of any meaning attached. The product was the experience of the theming itself.

Oriental architecture factored into this model of industrial leisure through such midways and pavilions. Taking part in over 25 international exhibitions

between 1867 and 1904, China gave the job of organizing and curating their pavilions to a handful of expatriates employed in the Imperial Maritime Customs Service in Shanghai, leading to designs that emphasized foreignness and fragility (Roskam, 2014). Over time, Chinese officials began to understand how the West used their pavilions to "determine a country's 'level of civilization'" (348), assisted by the burgeoning Beaux-Arts-trained community in Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Nanjing typified by the philosophy of Liang Sicheng.

On the onset of the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria threatened China's financial ability to appear at the fair. These troubles were temporary alleviated by Chicago industrialist Vincent Bendix's proposal to showcase his Bendix Golden Temple at the fair, a replica of the Tibetan Buddhist Wanfaguiyi Hall (Roskam, 2014). This structure fell in line with the historical relegation of Chinese heritage to exotic spectacle, as Roskam describes:

> The irony of the Bendix Golden Temple's status as a copy of a Qing replica of Tibetan Buddhist architecture did not register among fair officials, who instead sought to marry public demand for the raw exoticism of past fairs with the fair's own pseudoscientific message of technological advancement by promoting the building as an authentic and precise example of architectural mimicry. (353)

The Temple's mislabeling as the Chinese Pavilion in fair promotional materials and its presence in an event meant to showcase modern industrial progress made the building, though a technically sophisticated advancement in replica construction, highly controversial in the circles of the Chinese architectural elite.

After much pressure by fair officials, China created a Fair Participation Commission in 1932 to draft plans for a true pavilion in Chicago. Collecting plans from Shanghai-based American architect Henry Murphy and American-trained Chinese architects Xu Jingzhi, Tong Jun, and Wu Jingqi, fair officials were disappointed by the latter three's proposals' modernist massings and lack of oriental ornamentation, lamenting the state of Chinese architecture as "something like an awkward, fast-growing youth whose hands and feet are out of proportion to the rest of his body, and who has not yet learned how to handle them gracefully" (Roskam, 2013, 363). In March 1933, just two months after Chinese officials had reassured the Fair that "delay is a Chinese virtue," the government formally withdrew financial support for the pavilion. Following hasty fundraising by the Shanghai Exhibitor's Association, a final Chinese Pavilion was constructed at less than one-eighth of its intended size adjacent to that of warring Japan (see Fig. 1).

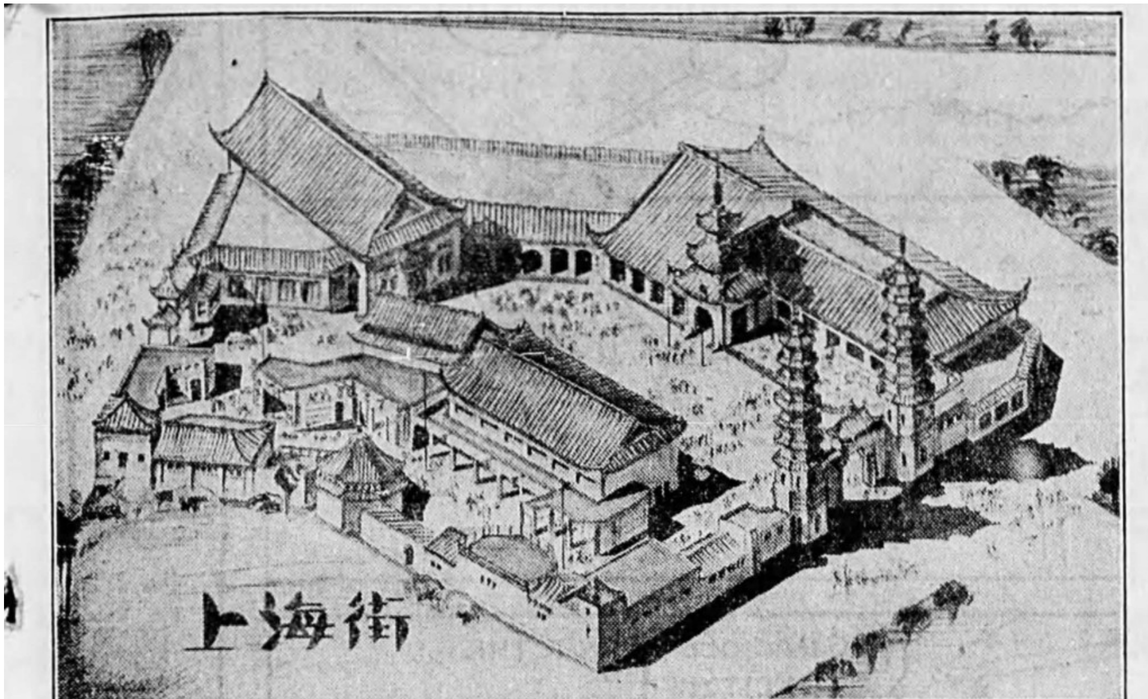

Figure 1. The Chinese Village at 1933 Chicago World's Fair (Source: French, 2016).

Mao's Ten Great Buildings

Where the 1933 Chicago World's Fair represented a catalyst moment in the failure of Republican China to stabilize the country in the face of the technological and military advances of the industrialized West and Japan, the victory of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 brought with it a new attitude towards the value and meaning of a national architecture. Mao immediately initiated massive state-funded propaganda projects in art and design, most notably the 1958 Ten Great Buildings commission (Andrews, 1994).

Intended to both spearhead the development of a new capital in Beijing while also making a statement of the new ruling party's revolutionary potential, the Ten Great Buildings were meant to symbolize China's emergence as a modern state. The ten individual projects were various forms of civic infrastructure and included the Great Hall of the People (see Fig. 2), the Museum of Revolutionary History, the National Museum of History, the Chinese People's Revolutionary Military Museum, the National Agricultural Exhibition Hall, the Nationalities Cultural Palace, the Beijing Train Station (see Fig. 3), the Worker's Stadium, the Nationalities Hotel, and the Overseas Chinese Hotel.

In addition to providing necessary infrastructures for the new city, these structures reflected a conscious attempt by the Communist Party to instill an evolutionary narrative of Chinese history leading from the dynasties of antiquity to Mao himself. Despite these aspirations to unite the fractured histories of China into a single state narrative, the architecture that was meant to embody this was largely a muddied mix of foreign architectural influences. The buildings were designed by

the state-run Yong Mao Construction Company, a conglomeration of the three formerly private firms of American-trained Yang Tingbao, European-trained Zhu Zhaoxue, and Shanghai-based Gu Chengpeng (Hu, 2009). Stylistically, the structures draw heavily on Stalinist Classicism and the International Style, themselves an evolution of Art Deco and Beaux-Arts influences, decorated with relatively blunt oriental ornamentation.

Though the synthesis of modernism with historical Chinese imagery was groundbreaking and distinctly Maoist, today the structures read as Soviet and aesthetically dated. Meant to draw on the permanence of other cultures of antiquity, the mix of classical, modern, and historicist components created a contextually confused architecture that reflected the struggles of Maoist China to navigate its economic development with its cultural ideology through the mid-twentieth century. The buildings did develop a distinctly Chinese architecture, but intrinsically dated themselves and limited their impact as a historical style through their implicit association with the Maoist government.

Figure 2. The Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square; note the classical columns and massing (Source: Delso, 2006).

Figure 3. The Beijing Railway Station, an uneasy marriage of Art Deco and Orientalist aesthetics (Source: Robertyhn, 2004).

Macau

The dating of Maoist architecture was made particularly visceral through Deng Xiaoping's economic liberalization policies of the late twentieth century. Processes of globalization and the opening of the country to foreign capital flows brought with it distinctly global urban development patterns. As the West's economic presence in Southeast Asia shifted from industrial to neoliberal structures, the Chinese government was strained to find a middle ground between welcoming foreign capital and resisting the ideological and economic strings so often attached to Western foreign direct investment.

In this context, China's relationship with the colonial cities of Macau and Hong Kong grew to prominence on the global stage. Deng Xiaoping's "one country, two systems" principle sought to mitigate tensions by openly assuring the preservation of the political and economic systems of the regions in exchange for achieving the reunification of pre-colonized China. In many ways, China, Macau, and Hong Kong had already established a delicate economic coexistence, with Macau's gambling economy developing in part out of a decline in trade coinciding with the rise of Hong Kong's deep-water port and a gambling ban in Mainland China. The transfer of sovereignty of Hong Kong from Britain to China in 1997 and Macau from Portugal to China in 1999 furthered these relationships, particularly in Macau via the streamlining of immigration policies allowing Mainland Chinese visitors and the liberalization of the casino industry in 2001 (Manfredini et al., 2013).

These economic and political relationships are manifest visually in the built form of Macau's leisure industries, mediated by the negotiation of the identity of

Macau's residents and the consumptive desires of its visitors. The boom in development after the 1999 transfer was largely financed by unauthorized state funds from Mainland China, yet confronted by millions of dollars by the Portuguese government to solidify Macau's cultural heritage and sense of place as distinctly Portuguese (Clayton, 2009). By 1999, Portugal had reclaimed land totaling 56% of the total land area in Macau and financed a new airport, tunnel, bridge, container port, sports stadium, cultural center, museums, and arts commission in which seven Portuguese artists built public monuments leading to the transfer. Yet with 66% of visitors coming from Mainland China and another 21% from Hong Kong, the Portuguese influences on the built landscape are at best a "staged authenticity" for the consumption of cultural heritage amidst a broader landscape of Chinese capital (IFT Tourism, 2016 and Manfredini et al., 2013).

In the context of these mediations of identity, the liberalization of Macau's casino industry operationalized the unique opportunity for an overtly neoliberal landscape driven by Chinese demand. The architecture of Macau's casinos reflects not only the branded fantasies of global operators like the Venetian, Sands, and MGM but also distinctly Chinese typologies of form. This is visible in the Grand Lisboa, designed by Hong Kong-based Dennis Lau & NG Chun Man Architects, features a central tower supposedly meant to reflect the headdresses of Brazilian Carnival but in the context of Macau appearing more as a façade of a Chinese pagoda (see Fig. 4), further implied by the casino's Asian art displays and the prominent featuring of lotus flowers in the hotel rooms.

Perhaps the most convincing example of Macau's implicit Orientalism is in the perception of the city in Western media. In Sam Mendes's 2012 James Bond film *Skyfall*, Macau is depicted not in its Vegas-esque reality but in an imagined floating casino called the Golden Dragon (see Fig. 5). Built to scale on a London soundstage, the set piece is a low-lying cluster of sweeping gable roofs outlined by pale yellow incandescent lights in a sea of floating lanterns. James Bond himself arrives via a lantern boat that passes through the threshold of the mouth of an enormous dragon's head. Though blatant use of oriental imagery is not new to the James Bond franchise, the selection of Macau as setting to the scene and complete dismissal of the city's actual built environment reflects the perceptions of the West towards contemporary and historical Chinese architecture.

Figure 4. The Grand Lisboa casino in Macau at center (Source: heintges, n.d.).

Figure 5. The fictitious Golden Dragon Casino from the movie *Skyfall*, set in Macau but constructed in Britain (Source: Sterling, 2013).

DISCUSSION

The case studies of the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, Ten Great Buildings Program, and contemporary Macau span almost a century of history and occupy distinctly different moments in the history of modern China yet are tied together through a chronology defined by skewed international power structures. In Chicago, xenophobia veiled as a consumptive desire for exoticism drove the fair organizers demand for oriental designs from China's pavilion, even going so far as to block the development of a new modernist Chinese architecture in the process. In Beijing, Mao's desire to redefine China on the international stage was limited by the available domestic talent having been Western-trained. And in Macau, power plays between Chinese capital and the Portuguese government facilitated a surface-level projection of "Chineseness" atop a Vegas-like neoliberal reality.

Further, these three case studies center on the active and conscious pursuit of creating a built representation of Chinese identity. The organizers of the Chinese Pavilion in Chicago understood that the fair was an opportunity to display their government's ability to turn China into a modern state. The added subtext is that not only did the Western fair organizers actively prevent them from displaying this, the costs of the geopolitical crisis in Manchuria was a physical demonstration of the fragility of Republican China being usurped by industrialized Japan. These humiliations of the republican government were a source of power for Mao during the rise of Communist China, and his hopes to develop a distinct national architecture in Beijing were meant to be an active and deliberate refutation of the West's ability to dictate Chinese identity. And in many ways, the real and imagined representations of Macau act as a barometer of the success of Mao's intentions, with the globalist reality of the city's built environment overshadowed by the romantic imaginations of Hollywood and the West.

Through examining these mediations of power and identity, the difficulties facing the development of a Chinese architecture become visible. While the state continues to grow in importance on the world stage, its continued reliance on Western educations for its elites and increasing passivity in resisting global capitalism reflect the vulnerabilities of the young nation's rapid growth into modernity. In this way, China's continued internal struggles with identity limit its ability to be a driving force in the expansion of global capital and neoliberal development, even as Western states face crises within themselves threatening their abilities to continue dominating such power structures.

CONCLUSION

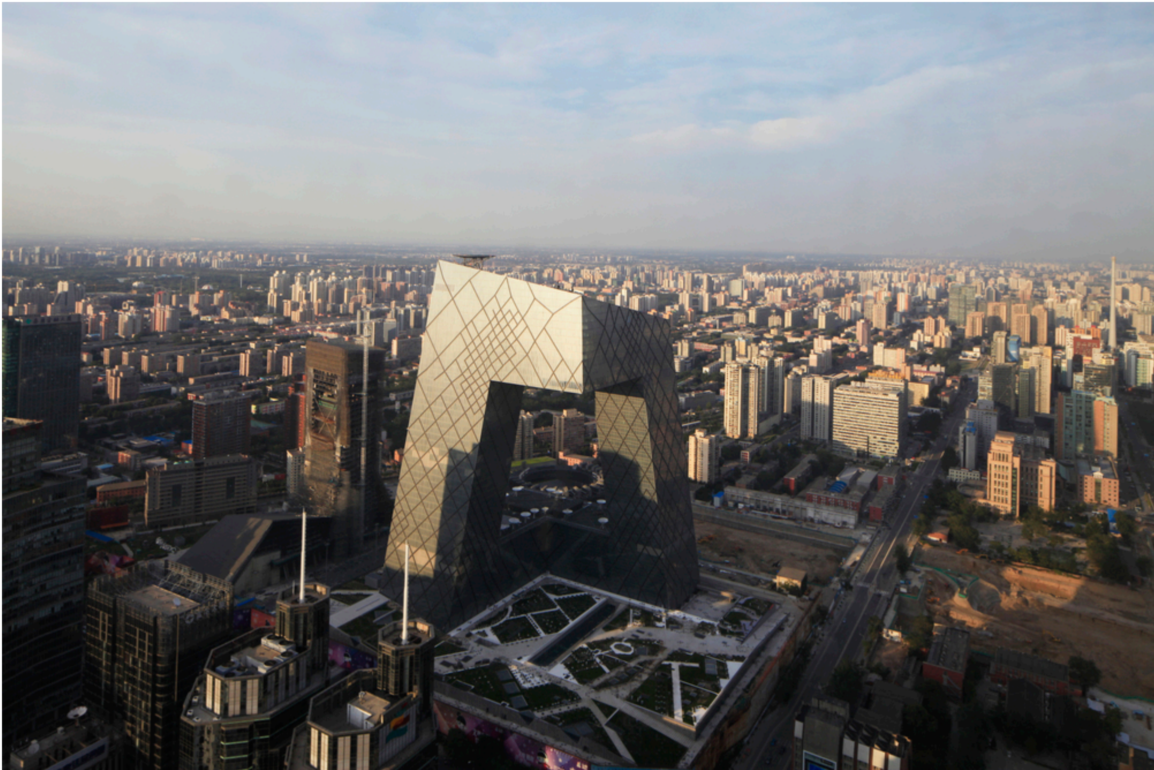

Figure 6. OMA's CCTV Headquarters in Beijing (Source: Baan, n.d.).

Figure 7. Zaha Hadid's Galaxy Soho project in Beijing (Source: Etherington, 2013).

In February 2016, the Communist Party's Central Committee issued a directive on a number of urban planning topics, including a follow-up to President Xi Jinping's call for the end of "weird architecture" nationwide. The directive called for buildings "suitable, economic, green and pleasing to the eye" and ordered the halt of "oversized [and] xenocentric" projects devoid of cultural tradition (Li, 2016). The move was seen as sign of Xi Jinping's continued fight against corruption and mismanagement on the municipal level, the directive serving as a stop-order to the misappropriation of funds by local governors towards large "starchitecture" projects intended to place cities and provinces on the global map.

Though it is yet to be seen if the order will have an effect on the Chinese architectural landscape, it reflects the decades of tensions described in this paper coming to a head. The dominance of foreign-designed megaprojects like OMA's CCTV Headquarters and Zaha Hadid's Galaxy Soho project (see Figs. 6 and 7) has transformed the country's urban environments into scaleless, fractured landscapes defined by the occasional sculptural form juxtaposing itself against sprawling monotony (Overstreet, 2016). The rejection of these forms is best seen in Hadid's Galaxy Soho: claimed by the architect to represent the mountains of Beijing, the building has been labeled offensive by the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center, who decried the international community's praise of the project despite its multiple violations of local preservation laws and regulations (Etherington, 2013).

These currents reflect a growing movement against the dominance of neoliberal architecture in China. Led by domestic architects like Wang Shu who theorize and design according to nuanced interpretations of Chinese history, the

movement appears to be formulating another attempt at developing a true Chinese architecture. Wang Shu, who was trained in China at the Nan Nanjing Institute of Technology, won the 2012 Pritzker Prize, the highest honor in architecture, for his commitment to "responsible architecture arising from a sense of specific culture and place" (The Hyatt Foundation, 2017; see Fig. 8).

Thus, China seems to be approaching another historical moment that will define the trajectory of its search for a national architecture. While the works of Wang Shu and his contemporaries reflect an active growth in domestically-sourced projects, it is these scholars' participation in the Chinese university system that will likely have the greatest impact on China's architecture future. The growth of domestic talent taught by domestic scholars will be integral in the development of an architecture that is defined by the intricacies of China's history, culture, and future.

Figure 8. The Xiangshan Campus of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, designed by Wang Shu (Source: The Hyatt Foundation, 2017).

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