

Extended Abstract: *Chinese Modernity between Western Imperialism and Native Tradition: A Shanghai Case Study*

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Abstract

The present investigation attempts to analyse the development of modern architecture in Shanghai during the Republican Period (1912-1937). The study attempts to analyse distinct case studies: Metropolitan Consumer Culture in Nanking Road; Modern Movement in Honqiao Sanatorium; and Nationalist Architecture in the Greater Shanghai Plan.

The study finds shared problems within all case studies born out of the uneven imperial relationship between China and the West. Western models were supplanted over Chinese traditions, ignoring any cultural differences by subscribing to a temporally universal worldview. Metropolitan alienation, tabula rasa erasure of tradition, and a singular homogenous conception of a Chinese identity are all by-products of this Western thought diaspora.

A support for the concept of “Multiple Modernities” as a sustainable solution towards Western global homogenization is defended in this study, finding in every case study similarities and differences that might offer possible alternatives towards the analysed topics. In this purview, the modular societal structure of China, which harmonizes Daoist acceptance of change and Confucian rigid hierarchy, and the Chinese embrace of oppositions, instead of an Hegelian confrontation, are seen as a remarkable addition to offer new models for exploration to the modern struggle.

01 – Introduction

China’s encounter with modernity will be informed and influenced by the imperial context in which it arose. China’s previous status as the ‘*Zhōngguó*’ – the ‘*Middle Country*’ – which conceptualized China at the centre of the cosmos will be challenged by Western supremacy.ⁱ

Whereas Chinese tradition conceptualized a correlative worldview; where the subject is coterminous with the cosmos and meaning is found within the intangible relationship between objects in a perpetually *changing* environment, the culture that Western missionaries brought to China in the form of scientific innovations was based on an opposite conception, Cartesian dualism; where the subject is external and separate from the surrounding environment and value is derived from the individual and objects themselves. Furthermore, whereas China trends to treat opposites as complementary, *Yīn Yáng*, the West sees them as conflicting, *dialectics*.ⁱⁱ

These differences extend to each culture’s conception of space and its materialization in architecture. Chinese space is a by-product of China’s two fundamental interrelated oppositions – Confucianism and Daoism. If Daoist *fluidity* imbues Chinese space with an *apperceptive* and *formless* nature, appreciating *blurred* relationships in its *rimless world*ⁱⁱⁱ, Confucian *rigidity* will structure such fluidity on a fixed modular geometry of closed walls and a highly standardized and rationalized building system. On the other hand, the West will materialize its individualist separation of the cosmos in Renaissance space and the *monumentality* of its objects.

While Cartesian dualism grew and was increasingly adopted in China throughout the 19th and 20th century,

due to imperialist cultural hegemony, a similar environment to that of Chinese tradition started to appear in Europe with the advent of *modernity* – an environment in perpetual *change*.

The West's implicit *modernness* will be used as fuel and justification for their imperialist project and in the process, equate the *modern* with the *Western* ignoring similar traditions (such as China's). The technological supremacy and existential threat of the West over other nations made it so that a paradoxical need to learn from the West in order to repel it was pursued^{iv}. Foreign treaty ports such as Shanghai will be stable points of modernization within China and interesting topics of research of a Chinese embrace of western modernity.

02 – Consumer Metropolis in Nanking Road

When tracing the developments of Chinese modernity, a study of the creation of a modern metropolitan experience within Shanghai will provide an important research to be carried. The new anonymous metropolitan experience gave an unprecedented degree of freedom within an enticing visual and sensual spectacle of *stimuli*. The Baudelairian metropolis will be a *collage* of changing images and people. Within this spectacular and transient environment then, the *new*, is going to be what's valuable and recognized. The phenomenon of consumption is going to make use of the *novelty* as the driving force of the money economy.

It was not long before spaces that could accommodate this phenomenon were created within a single unitary space – the *Department Store*. In no other place did the consumer culture crystallize better than in Nanking Road. By 1900 it had over two hundred shops and over 60.000 inhabitants per square kilometre^v and its building typology changed from the overwhelming two-storey Chinese teashops to *new* massive constructions. Department Stores were quickly established, first by foreigners for

foreigners, and later by Chinese entrepreneurs to penetrate the growing Chinese middle class market^{vi}.

Sincere and *Wing'On* were the first Chinese department stores to be constructed, in 1917 and 1918 respectively. Both placed a focus on *novelty*, introducing the foreign and new concept of fixed prices into the Chinese market, with completely new scales for the Chinese clientele, and were purposefully designed in a neo-Classical style^{vii} to invoke the allure of *foreign prestige*. These establishments also served as places of an immense *spectacle* in order to allure massive crowds. Both featured hotels, cinemas, and roof-gardens in which to enjoy the outdoors and were adorned with neon lights which completely transformed them by night.

In 1930's construction in height and the oncoming of the new *modern* style – *Art Déco* – will crystallize Nanking Road's consumer culture. In 1926 Karoly Gonda designed the *Sun Sun Company Department Store* next to *Sincere*; in 1934 *Wing'On* built a twenty one storey art deco extension; in 1934 László Hudec's *Park Hotel* was opened, remaining China's highest building for decades; and in 1936 *Dah Sun Department Store* opened with 44.5m, twice bigger than *Sincere*. The building was the culmination of four department stores which had one function in the entire city, to provide the Western experience of modern consumption, towards a Chinese middle-class clientele. Both Park Hotel and Dah Sun will become monumental icons of Shanghai juxtaposed by clusters of two-storey Chinese *shophouses* surrounding them.



Figure 01 Neon Lights of Nanking Road showcasing the contrasting scale between buildings

The alienation that characterizes the modern metropolis, shocking its citizens with its rapidly changing images and intense scale, will devalue and exhaust subjective value from its objects and be characterized by a turn towards objectivity by Georg Simmel^{viii}. With the transience of value becoming the only constant within the logic of commodities, the one thing that became truly meaningful was their *novelty*, stuck in a transient destructive cycle.

Shanghai's colonial setting will imbue the *alienating* character of the consumer metropolis with an equally alienating foreign character. The elevation of social strata was reached not only through the consumption of novel commodities but, more importantly, foreign commodities. There was a conflation of Western forms with *modernization*, hence the use of the Western tradition instead of Chinese designs^{ix}. The allure of foreign prestige was something to be pursued but impossible to achieve. For many Chinese residents most of these foreign forms were literally impossible to access^x.

Building in height was no strange sight for the Chinese. Pagodas had been built in China since the 5th century^{xi}, but they engendered very different feelings from the Chinese. Whereas pagodas sought to relate with nature and the building compound they were in, following the Chinese correlative search for *correlations*, skyscrapers attempted the opposite: to *stand out*, externalize themselves from its surrounding environment.

Furthermore, the skyscraper's junction of an attempt to concentrate capital within a single *object* and the highly changing environment of the modern metropolis will make it an *object without value*. The building's main drive will be its economic value^{xii}.

While these paradoxes and alienating problems can be found within the rapidly changing modern metropolis, Chinese urban tradition provides a useful model that both accommodates *growth* and *change*,

and doesn't paradoxically attempt to control it with rational and alienating processes. The Chinese *correlative view* will extend to urban space itself. Its insistence on being part of an interrelated environment rather than a *single entity*, will create urban models, that, while structured, will not arise the feelings of alienation resulting from the western metropolitan environment. While the Chinese city will be a *mosaic collage* of differing and changing environments, it will be structured within a rationalized and integrated metabolist logic of *growth* and *adaptability*^{xiii}. The oppositions between urban and rural and chaos and order will be harmoniously integrated, not alienated.

The cluster of buildings that co-existed with the towering structures on Nanking Road, *shophouses* – *adaptations* of the *sihéyuàn* module – were low-storey adaptable and relational structures. They were composed of multiple inter-related building compounds rather than attempting to accommodate every single experience unto *one single space* on the name of commodity capital. Within them we see a different formulation, native and non-alienating, that might provide us different alternatives towards our current capitalist consumer spaces. They stand as an example of a culture that is rooted not in foreign alienating models, which disconnect the individual from its surrounding environment, but rather, in soft relational urban clusters with a human and relational scale.



Figure 02 Contrast between Department Stores and surrounding Chinese shops

03 – Modern Movement in Hongqiao Sanatorium

The belief on reason as a universal value, and the unbridled optimism in humanity's infinite *progress* based on it, is the *lingua franca* of Western modernity.^{xiv} The Modern Movement's strongest characteristic will rely on this to use objective reason and the power of industrialization to progress and universalize architecture. The more objectivist direction of the Movement will then try to construct an architecture based on rational and universal values.

To achieve this, the Movement will reject ornament, tending towards an aesthetic of universal abstraction and standardized and rationalized models which attempt to accurately measure objective improvements in design, such as comfort, health, cleanliness and hygiene.^{xv}

The first generation of Chinese architects studied abroad through the Boxer Indemnity Fund having had the chance to go to universities abroad. In 1923, Xi Fuquan (1902-1983), studied and travelled in Germany in the seminal years of the 1920's.^{xvi} Xi's architecture, then, will follow closely the developments of the Modern Movement. The *Shanghai Hongqiao Convalescent Hospital* of 1934, the '*Hongqiao Sanatorium*', due to its program, will be its more modern design.

Hongqiao Sanatorium will be built on a functionalist rationale: it segregates its building according to function in order to not disturb its patients; it uses Richard Döcker's (1894-1968) recessed terraced typology to ensure maximum sun exposure; it is constructed in concrete framing, with a formal abstraction that soothes the nerves; it uses pure white walls for a neutral environment, rubber flooring for soundproofing^{xvii} and a curved ceiling-wall header connection to soothe the edges in the room; and it partitions and isolates each patient's bedrooms through the use of partitioning walls and translucent canopies in each balcony. The building was built on a rational basis and is truly a case of form follows

function. The formal connections with the Modern Movement can still be observed in the use of colour in the manner of Bruno Taut in his housing estates in Berlin and curved glass shapes coupled with horizontal volumes much like J.J.P. Oud.

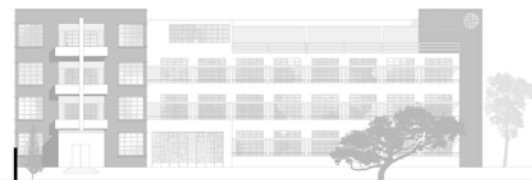
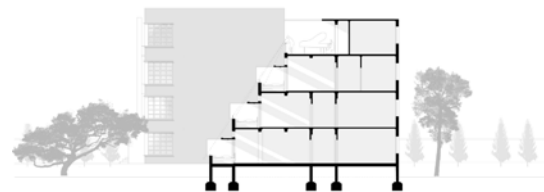


Figure 03 Xi Fuquan, *Hongqiao Sanatorium*, Shanghai, China (1934) – Section and Elevation of main building.

The sanatorium will look at the formulations of the Modern Movement as the future for architecture in China. The building strikes no resemblance to Xi's own Chinese identity, instead it insists on a notion of a shared 'global' architecture. That is except for a few minute details which find striking importance, since the building only shows its Chinese heritage in a department that the Modern Movement sought to eradicate - in its window lattices, its ornament.

The use of Chinese ornament indicates a recoil from the Modern Movement's universal formulations and a will to express national identity. A loss of cultural identity, as Adolf Loos (1870-1933) had noted is not as readily accepted in peripheral nations.

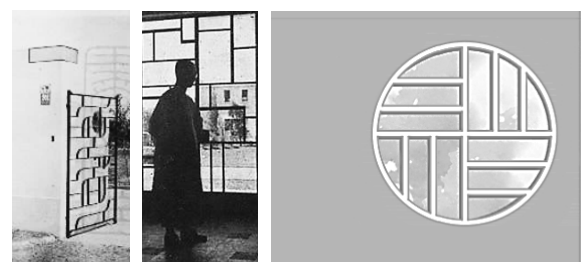


Figure 04 Xi Fuquan, *Hongqiao Sanatorium*, Shanghai, China (1934) – Chinese ornamental details.

Within the imperial context in which China and the West were, modernity will play a role in constructing this primitive *Other* in relation to the modern *West*. Modernity's *tabula rasa* desire to eradicate the old in order to build the new^{xviii} is here, then, taken as a literal subjugation and eradication of the *old Other* by the *new West*. While systematically denying a membership in its pantheon to the non-white non-West,^{xix} the Modern Movement, in its cosmopolitan endeavour, will realize a single homogenous global conception of modern architecture.

The Hongqiao Sanatorium can be said then to be an internalization on part of the colonized of a single western conception of modernity, of a *Westernization* through the use of objectivity and 'universal' reason. By ignoring Chinese tradition, Xi is placing it in the realm of the *old*, the *under-developed*, and hence, the *disposable*, that which is supposed to be eradicated.

The sanatorium's seemingly small opposition to the Movement's *tabula rasa* approach to ornament is noteworthy. Ornament, style and identity have always been intimately tied as was noted in Gottfried Semper's (1803-1879) theory of building *dröpfung*.

Processes of rationalization, modern Western culture's opposition to a unified style, sought to eradicate it amid a perceived loss of culture within modernity's chaotic and rationalized environment. But in Chinese tradition, one that has a highly standardized and modular architecture as well^{xx}, ornament never stood in opposition against it. In fact, Chinese culture itself is able to encompass processes of standardization and permanent change^{xxi}, much like modernity, while maintaining its identity and not tending towards universal abstraction.

Chinese correlative space will have fundamental similarities and differences with the Modern Movement itself. On the one hand it shared with the Movement its conception of space, a space that values *formlessness*, *inter-relations* and *spatial*

potential and a highly modular and standardized conception of building structure, seen in the *correlational and* highly modular Chinese timber-frame. On the other hand, it didn't dogmatically attempt to synthesize a *universal formula* but rather embraced variety and change within its correlative world, it embraced oppositions and harmoniously interrelated them instead of creating a split between thinking and feeling, hence its ability to bridge subjective culture with rational processes of rationalization.

Hongqiao Sanatorium's embrace of Western formulations and disregard for spatial differences not only participates in the colonial project of Western global homogeneity but also exhausts the modern project in its Western origins and ignores any new possible sources that might inform new kinds of spatial conceptions. By looking at Chinese tradition one notes similar concerns regarding standardization, modularity and spatial conception, but also fundamental differences which provide new outlooks to the same environment.

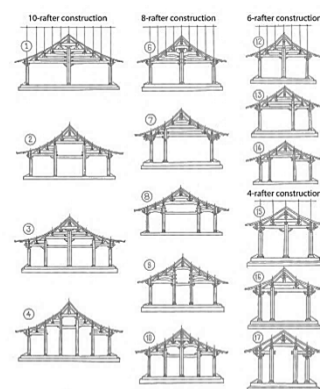
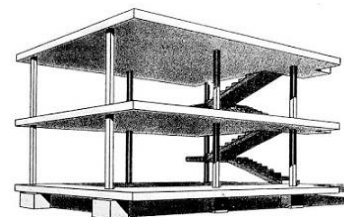


Figure 05 Le Corbusier, *Maison Dom-ino* (1914) and different variations of several *tingtang* in *Yingzao fashi*.

04 – Nationalism in Greater Shanghai Plan

The formation of a modern China, amid its loss of identity birthed a nationalist movement with a simultaneous need to search for one's roots and break with those roots in order to construct a modern project.

Benedict Anderson's (1936-2015) imagined community^{xxii}, the *nation* and its *people*^{xxiii}, will attempt to gain an *eternal* and *monumental* character. The way by which the nation and its people are governed and organized is through its self-representation in the impersonal and abstract *bureaucratic state*^{xxiv}. The State will represent its people and project its own authority with an *homogenous* and *monumental* architectural and urban dimension.

The modern nationalist project in China will confront the question of national liberation and native identity. Using the *ti-yong* concept, a separation of a Chinese *ti* (essence) with a foreign *yong* (form or technology in this case), the nationalist movement will embark on a historiographical project to search for China's roots while incorporating modern foreign technology. In architecture, this project was carried out by the 1st generation of Chinese architects who studied abroad under the Beaux-Arts methodology. An attempt to construct a revivalist and modern style, with a Chinese *ti* and a foreign *yong* will be carried out by this generation under the banner of the 'China Renaissance'.

This style was mainly developed within the two large urban projects carried out by the Nationalist government during the 1920's and 30's – the new capital in Nanjing and the *Greater Shanghai Plan* of 1929. The *Greater Shanghai Plan*'s main goal was a direct statement of national sovereignty. The heart of the plan, designed by Dong Dàoyǒu along clear American City Beautiful lines, covered about 330 acres. Modelled after Washington DC's *National Mall McMillan Plan* (1902), and Beaux-Artian urban

planning guidelines the plan was a homogenous monumental ensemble of stately building surrounded by open plazas and long stretching boulevards which created grand perspectives for these representations of the nation. At the center was Dàoyǒu's *Mayor's Building* (1933), the crown jewel of the entire *Civic Centre*.

The chosen architecture, the Chinese *ti*, was an adaptation of the Palaces of the Forbidden City in Beijing with their vermilion columns, tiled and curved roofs, and big stone podiums. As an adaptation, the building's modern *yong* was found in its Beaux-Artian influence. The building follows the Beaux-Artian *tripartite* scheme found in Burnham's *Union Station* (1907), with two symmetrical side wings and a central volume and sought its *monumentality* not in height but in its open surrounding arrangement and symmetry. It followed in its programme and construction modern Western formulations, constructed in reinforced concrete with a modern truss system supporting its big roof, and modern amenities like indoor plumbing and central electricity^{xxv}, elevators, electric lights, water heaters, plumbing fixtures, proper heat and ventilation^{xxvi} and housed modern spaces for governmental bureaucracy.

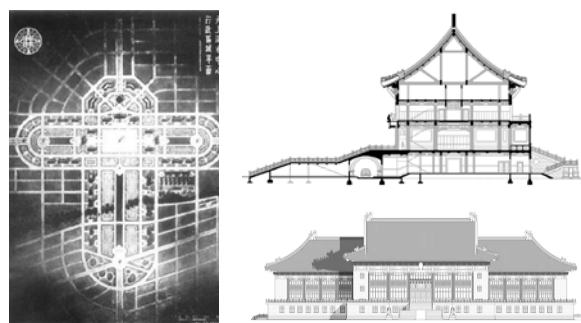


Figure 06 Dong Dayou, *Greater Shanghai Civic Centre*, Shanghai (1931) – Plan; and Dong Dayou, *Mayor's Building*, Shanghai (1933-5) – Section and Façade

However, the style and the plan will show some fundamental problems and misconceptions in their formulations. Its implicit ability to separate foreign technology from foreign culture is itself a by-product of

the imperial relationship within which it was formulated. As seen with Jesuit missionaries in the past, foreign technology was seen as a stable way to establish Western hegemony over China and anti-foreign sentiment.

The style's origins lay in the 'Localization Movement', a missionary attempt to 'sinify' Christian institutions in order to ease the missionary mission in China and was originally formulated by a foreign architect, Henry Murphy. In doing so it relied on a foreign gaze to legitimate what was to be Chinese architecture, a gaze that would be permeated by Western architectural formulations – most of all in the notion of an *urban façade* that attempted to represent something external to the building, in this case *China* itself.

In this sense, the search for a Chinese *tí*, by forcing a homogenization of Chinese culture through a Western *yòng* –the Beaux-Arts tradition - becomes akin to a Western conception of the *Orient*, a 'Orientalist architecture'. The concept of a homogenous representation of China within global-space is going to be the main aim of Dàyǒu's Greater Shanghai Plan both at an urban and architectural level. Such a project implies a cancellation of its own indigenous space and break with its own traditions in substitution of Western formulations resulting in recognition of complicity between nationalism and the imperialist aggressors.^{xxvii}

The domination of the urban space through a forced homogeneity will be accomplished using Western methods. The need to represent itself through a marked identity, to separate itself through its urban centre – the *town square* - is also an inherited Renaissance formulation, seen in Dong Dàyǒu's Civic Centre.

The external representation of itself through *monuments* is something completely foreign to the Chinese *apperceptive* correlative tradition. Each

building is going to become a *monument* and stand in isolation. The Mayor's building insistence on conceptualizing itself as a single *object*, seen in its Beaux-Artian tripartite juxtaposition of what should be three separate interrelated buildings, is going to find its sources in this necessity to homogenously represent the Chinese nation-state within its *urban façade*.

In China, the public sphere and the concept of a *façade* take completely different interpretations. Chinese architecture is a deeply *interior* architecture, its concepts of *urbanity* do not rely on urban *façades* facing the *exterior*.

Nowhere else is this *representational* aspect more clear than in the *dǒugǒngs* bracket-sets employed in the building. *Dǒugǒngs* are the most important Chinese architectural component, acting as the building module of its complex timber-frame system and mediating as the structural joint between its roof and columns. The building, using a reinforced concrete frame and a *modern* truss system, uses the entire timber-frame vocabulary as mere decoration, giving it a merely *symbolic and decorative* value.

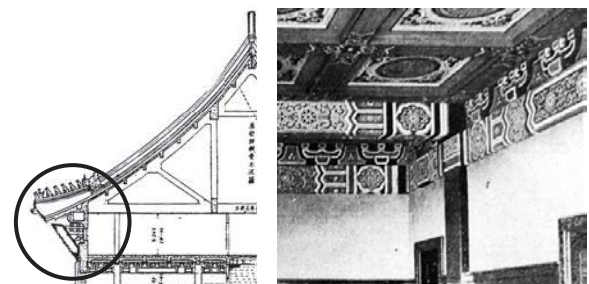


Figure 07 Dong Dayou, *Mayor's Building*, Shanghai (1933-5) – *Dougongs* as decoration

Chinese architecture has, despite its *apperceptive* quality, been able to maintain a unique, distinctly Chinese identity for millennia, which implies that *national identity* itself is a product of local, *apperceptive* and diverse formulations and not a forced homogenous conception. Through the Confucian-Daoist model Chinese architecture has

been able to maintain a stable identity while being built on a highly diverse and adaptable system.

Chinese urban spaces will accommodate highly diverse and changing environments and not tend towards a controlling visual homogeneity. The rationality employed was not a visual and dominating kind of rationality, but rather, organizational and fractal rationality, based on interrelationships and an ideology of *growth*. Beijing does not find the same conception of *public* as Renaissance cities did. What characterized its urban space were not *façades* expressive of the city but rather, a vast network of walled compounds where the urban life happens *inside* rather than *outside* and requires a phenomenological granular approach to be understood^{xxviii}.

By integrating highly rational structural models while allowing for a rich diversity of experiences and identities within its space, the Chinese city presents a formulation that strays away from a de facto rationality that attempts to homogenize its inner constituents. Furthermore, a lot of its own traditions allow for structured *change* rather than paradoxically engaging in a dichotomy between static and monumental urban models and a highly chaotic metropolitan environment, such as the one used in Greater Shanghai Plan, providing more sustainable models in which to build a modern urban project and allowing for more diverse representations of the *nation*.

05 – Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis attempts to defend Shmuel Eisenstadt's (1923-2010) concept of '*Multiple Modernities*' by studying the Chinese modern and imperial context. Within China, we see the problems in establishing one culture as the *signifier of the modern*: a fundamental misunderstanding and incompatibility of cultures and traditions which clash in paradoxical and contrasting ways; a westernization and homogenization of global culture with other nations being shaped in the view of what the West

deems them to be with slightly local variations, and finally, we exhaust the concept of modernity itself, limiting it to Western formulations.

Taking Paul Ricoeur's (1913-2005) notion of 'Universal Civilization and National Cultures' the thesis not only analysed the problems within the imperial modern context but also attempted to find the *modernity of Chinese tradition* as a way to showcase several similarities and key differences that might inform the modern project within China's local tradition. What was found was that Chinese tradition shares some fundamental similarities with modernity, namely an environment in perpetual change, but also some remarkable differences, namely in finding meaning in relationships and embracing oppositions as being inherently harmonious and correlational instead of confrontational. As such, a project that opens dialogue and allows Chinese architects to find the modernity of their own tradition is one that might have great value to their own identity and to global issues.

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