Invasion of China’s Traditional Architecture: A Review

Xia Qing, Mohd Hafizal Bin Mohd Isa*, Muhamad Azhar Bin Ghazali*

Architecture Department, School of Housing, Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia 11800, Penang, Malaysia

xia1126xia@gmail.com, hafizal@usm.my, azhar.ghazali@usm.my

Abstract. In the process of China’s rapid urbanization, the issue of ‘uniformity in Architectural identity’ has become more serious, while traditional Chinese architectures are replaced by alien buildings. Since 1978, the Chinese government has implemented a series of open policies that have stimulated economic development, driven the development of architecture and changed China's architectural style. Many countries in the context of globalization are inevitably obscured by their own characteristics, especially China. Contemporary Chinese architecture is completely modern and has lost its traditional identity and mainly has Western-style appearances. Chinese traditional architecture has almost withdrawn from the stage of building construction. This paper aims to review the reasons for the current status of Chinese architecture. The formation of China’s current construction status has internal reasons in China, and there are also reasons for globalization as the background of China’s construction and development. It was found that in recent years, a few architects have begun to pay attention to the construction and development of traditional Chinese architecture. It is hoped that China can continue to develop while not forgetting and abandoning its own traditions, and not losing its own characteristics and identity. The inheritance and development of traditional architecture is also the inheritance and development of culture. Even in the context of globalization, any country should strive not to lose its culture and identity.

1. Introduction

According to [1], the watershed in China’s recent history is widely regarded as Deng Xiaoping’s ‘gaige kaifang’ (reform and opening up) project that began in 1978. The tremendous changes in Chinese architecture also began after the implementation of this national policy. China’s open policy has brought China into the world economy. The rapid development of China's economy has promoted the development of China's construction industry. This brings China's globalization, especially after China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, [2]. According to [3], trade, together with foreign investment has brought in modern technologies and methods of management that have increased productivity in China, thereby, accelerated the development of China's construction industry. This also has increased the migration of expatriates, which have joined the construction industry in China. Under the guidance of Western architectural trends, China's construction industry has greatly improved the design level, and has also achieved some remarkable development achievements. However, there have been some drawbacks in the process of development. Based on a study done by [4], the home-building promotion program has resulted in a large number of residential buildings with small windows and high-rise buildings with large glass.
Figure 1. Alien architecture is replacing traditional architecture

In addition, more and more alien architectures are replacing traditional Chinese buildings, [5]. Alien architecture is eating buildings with Chinese characteristics like a huge hungry crocodile (Figure 1). In terms of building materials, reinforced concrete is more preferable compared to traditional building materials, such as natural stone, bamboo, wood, and clay. In terms of building mass, large-scale skyscrapers replaced low-rise buildings. Exquisite garden architecture, ethnic architecture, or religious architecture has not been seen in the construction of buildings in recent years. Most of the facades of modern Chinese architecture are glass curtain walls. Whether you live in the North or South of China, coastal or inland areas, the architecture of the cities are very similar, which do not portray the importance of sense of place. Therefore, this study proposes that the future of architecture should be planned wisely and rationally. Alien architecture should not completely replace traditional Chinese architecture. Chinese cities should have their own characteristics, and architecture should emphasize regionality. This paper analyzes the reasons for the formation of contemporary Chinese architecture.

2. Internal reasons for the current situation of Chinese architecture

The development and change of Chinese architecture is influenced by China's modern history. In 1840, the beginning of the Opium War marked the end of the feudal dynasty that started to affect the traditional Chinese architecture. During this period, the Chinese people were at war and struggled to fight, and knowledgeable Chinese began to accept and learn Western technologies to improve their "combat abilities". Wei Yuan proposed to learn from the advanced technologies in the West in order to resist the invasion of the Western powers. The idea of this concept laid the foundation for learning from the West and played a positive role in China's development. In 1949, the People's Republic of China was established. The country after the war was facing a major task of post-disaster reconstruction. However, the development of the country had not started and carried out in a positive way because of the wrong plans and implementation in national policy. However in 1978, Deng Xiaoping began to implement the reform and opening up policy during his leadership at that time. According to [1], the policy has boosted up economic development and material prosperity. Before the implementation of the reform and opening up policy, no matter whether it was Beijing or Shanghai, almost no tall buildings could be seen. After the implementation of a series of open policies in China, 40 years have passed, and China's urban constructions have taken on a new shape andlook. Not only large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, but even small cities in tier 3 or tier 4 are filled with tall buildings, [4]. In addition, managers and developers are increasingly passionate about new technologies, [6]. Under the guidance of advanced Western technologies and ideas, Chinese architecture has developed vigorously. The emergence of new materials has led to the emergence of alien building types and architectural forms that are out of the harmony of existing urban environments in China, [6]. There are three reasons for the replacement of traditional Chinese buildings by alien buildings.
2.1. Cultural inferiority
According to [7], the mainstream of Chinese officials believes that past traditions have led to China's aggression, and that Western learning has allowed China to develop. It is inevitable and necessary to say goodbye to past traditions. Therefore, starting from the reform and opening up policy in 1978, the development of Chinese cities reflects a top-down identity split. This is the main reason for the abandonment of traditional culture. It seems to be blamed on the national inferiority caused by the war in China. That is what the ancestors were not good at, whether it was political system or culture, which was the reason why China was invaded. On the contrary, as long as it is foreign (Western), it is good. After the implementation of the reform and opening up policy, the huge visual gap between China and the West has greatly enhanced this feeling of inferiority. This prompted us to say 'goodbye' to the past quickly. Moreover, Chinese leaders and officials mainly focus on the economy and ignore the inheritance and development of the national culture, [7]. China's urbanization has changed patterns of daily life and urban environment, which has led to the loss of architectural heritage, [6]. New political and social formations, new sets of values and beliefs, new social identities, and new subjectivities have emerged, [6]. People in urban areas are often satisfied with Western-style of architecture. But gradually, the sense of freshness and modernism will be replaced by the sense of loss of identity. Architecture is the embodiment of culture. Losing the traditional architectural culture contributed to the loss of its identity to a certain extent.

2.2. Time constraint
It was found by [8] and [9] that the level of urban population in China was less than 20 percent of the population in 1978, and then reached 59.58% in 2018. The rapid growth of urbanization in the past 40 years is due to a series of national policies. Because of the wrong policies in the early days of the founding of the country, the construction of the country has been in a blank period. Therefore, in the initial stage of the implementation of reform and opening up, the government has only one requirement for construction, which is fast. This made the architects, who were not ready to build a new Chinese city at that time, have no time to think. They began to choose the simplest and fastest way to copy the urban architecture of western developed countries, so that China also has many modern cities. Based on a study done by [4], Chinese local governments encourage building to boost local output and employment, as well as to raise revenue from land sales. The government's policy is to let the Chinese construction industry blindly pursue and imitate the modern development of Western developed countries. The culture of traditional Chinese architecture has not been effectively passed down and developed. Under the government's promotion policy, people are busy building high-rise buildings, but they have forgotten their traditional buildings. In the initial stage, China chose Western-style architecture to abandon traditional architecture. After 40 years, the construction of Chinese architecture seems to be still imitating the copying stage, and there is no awareness of architectural innovation and improvement. In the process of construction, the problem of 'one thousand cities have one face' has gradually emerged. Clearly, a one-size-fits-all approach to strategic planning for urban development in China is untenable, [8]. However, the decision-makers of China's construction industry still have no effective solutions to this problem, and there is little interest in the inheritance and development of traditional architecture.

2.3. No traditional architectural aesthetic awareness
According to [5], contemporary architectural practices lack the sensitiveness towards the natural environment. For China, the practicality and modernization of architecture is the primary choice. That is to say, as long as the building can be used, the architect does not have to think about the aesthetics of the building. Therefore, until today, the understanding of architecture is still available, from the builders of the building to the users of the building without an aesthetic sense of the exterior of the building. Of course, the most important reason is that those who decide the style of architectural design have a preference and blind worship for Western architecture. The one-size-fits-all model mentioned above is also a manifestation of the lack of architectural aesthetics, [8]. Building developers
demand that architects design buildings that are more international in appearance and closer to Western modern architecture. Sometimes they even ask for some exaggerated or even strange buildings. However, the space and form of buildings are the most frequently constituted of society. Their visual image announces its presence – in the city, in the nation, and in various distinct worlds, [10]. Just like the dressing style of people, national costumes are neglected or even abandoned. The mainstream of the market is the so-called ‘internationalized’ products. The current objective facts are that large cities, such as Shanghai and Beijing, have developed at a comparable level to the West, and urban imagery tends to be homogenized with Western cities. Chinese cities have lost their brands in the aesthetics of architecture.

3. External reasons for the current situation of Chinese architecture

Few people pay attention to the inheritance and development of traditional Chinese architecture. It was found by [11] that the phenomenon of globalization and the formation of new global networks, both physical and virtual, impact upon our perception of both place and identity. In today's world, the rise of a global information society has also led to foreseeable changes. The ‘cultural convergence’ brought about by ‘globalization’ will inevitably lead to ‘construction convergence’ between regions. Based on history, special culture and experience that used to be the background of traditional architectural significance in the past have been ruled out by globalization. The connection between architecture and a particular society is gradually blurred. A common criticism of globalization is that it tends toward uniformity, and that it undermines local cultures and value systems, [8]. The globalization of technology and production methods has brought about the separation of human and traditional geographical space, and the characteristics of regional culture have gradually declined. Standardized production of goods leads to a convergence of the building environment, mediocrity of design, and reduction of the diversity of architectural culture.

After series of China's open policies, they have contributed towards China's globalization. Especially after joining the WTO in 2001, advanced construction technology and experience, advanced architectural ideas, and sufficient funds have accelerated the rapid development of China's construction industry. While driving the rapid development of China's economy, it also injected a different culture into China. According to [7], the assessment that often resulted was that globalization posed a potential threat to China. The biggest impact of globalization on China's cities and buildings is the rapid development of urbanization and the major projects in urban planning and architectural design. Most of the projects are led or participated by international architects. The exchange and integration of world cultures have made culture more unified. A critical question is whether the dispositions associated with Chinese culture can survive the interjection of foreign modes of expression, [8]. For China, globalization is an opportunity, but a challenge, ‘double-edged sword’ views of globalization remains dominant in China, [7]. The mainstream view of Chinese leaders, officials, and researchers is that globalization poses dangers but that it is inevitable and that China has no rational choice other than to fully participate in the process, [7]. The Westernization of Chinese architecture seems to be an inevitable trend. But future developments are still influenced and determined by government policies. In fact, most countries are facing the challenges of globalization like China. Therefore, a correct national policy is really essential.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper reviews the reasons that affect the status quo of Chinese architecture. As mentioned above, China's economy has developed rapidly for nearly half a century, more and more alien buildings have sprung up. Some designers and construction investors have done some exaggerated and strange architectural appearance to attract people's attention. Few people pay attention to the inheritance and development of traditional Chinese architecture.

Architecture is a large-scale embodiment of human culture. Architecture is not a work of art that needs to be seen in museums, like calligraphy, painting, or sculpture. Architecture is a kind of...
‘artwork’ that you can enjoy as long as you are willing to see it. As a manifestation of culture, architecture should retain its own geographical features. Architecture is a symbol of social culture, and its visual image often declares its place of existence. Chinese architect Wang He said that architectural culture should emphasize regionalism. China's traditional culture has been completely destroyed along with the rapid development of the economy and the decline of traditional morality. The traditional architecture, as the carrier of Chinese culture is also devastated by the cultural catastrophe and the rapid urbanization tide.

The building reflects the development of a civilization. Traditional Chinese architecture is a ship that carries information about specific social values. The values we hold now are affecting the course of the ship. As a kind of existing civilization, whether civilization can be inundated by Western civilization in modern society, depends not only on the continuation of the age or the influence of radiation, but also on whether this civilization can truly stand in harmony and integration. If Chinese architecture continues to blur its regional cultural characteristics or even abandon it completely, and continue to build alien architecture without paying attention to traditional Chinese architecture, then Chinese architecture may lose itself, no longer have its own characteristics, and lose its Chinese brand. China should think critically about globalization and improve its ability to create and innovate to meet the challenges of globalization without losing identity.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the School of Housing, Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of Research University Grant (RUI) (Ref No: PPBGN1001/PPBGN814285).

References

[1] Liu K 2004 Globalization and cultural trends in China
[2] Dong X, Bowles P and Chang H 2010 Managing Liberalization and Globalization in Rural China: Trends in Rural Labour Allocation, Income and Inequality Globalization and Labour in China and India (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK) pp 25–44
[3] Chow G C 2005 Globalization and China’s Economic and Financial Development
[4] Glaeser E, Huang W, Ma Y and Shleifer A 2017 A Real Estate Boom with Chinese Characteristics J. Econ. Perspect. 31 93–116
[5] Senarath N K 2001 Design with the Nature
[6] Cetin M 2010 Trends of the Transformation of Urban Form in Arab Cities with Specific Reference to Al-Khobar J. Civ. Eng. Archit. 4 51–7
[7] Garrett B 2001 China Faces, Debates, the Contradiction of Globalization Asian Surv. 41 409–27
[8] Heikkila E J 2007 Three questions regarding urbanization in China J. Plan. Educ. Res. 27 65–81
[9] Xiru L 2019 The total population has grown steadily, and urbanization has been steadily increasing. Bur. Natl. Stat. China
[10] Anthony D.King 2004 Spaces of Global Cultures vol 84
[11] Brown R and Maudlin D 2011 Concepts of Vernacular Architecture 340–55