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Preservation, Adaptation, and Commercialization of Urban Chinese Architecture in Western China

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Since the 1980s, China’s ascent as an economic juggernaut and its reactions to the massive development that has gripped the country have drawn the eyes of observers everywhere. As far as recent history goes, the change in landscapes that China has undergone has been immense. Human migration, on a scale that can only be found within a country as populous as China, has created metropoli in every region of the PRC. It is nearly impossible to visit any area, urban or rural, not undergoing some form of construction or repair. In light of the changes China is undergoing, many concerns have arisen about the preservation of Chinese history and national heritage. These concerns are easily showcased in the treatment of historical architecture within Chinese cities. In urban areas, the use or preservation of traditional styles to create a culturally “Chinese” atmosphere, allows certain elements of traditional aesthetics to be preserved, while elements impractical within the city are discarded. From my experience, I would argue that traditional elements are only included if they provide some economic reward in their construction/inclusion, by providing an attraction to tourists or as a way to provide a unified theme in different cities across western China.

In our trip to Yunnan and Tibet, we were exposed to cities that featured traditional architecture, as well as rural villages where contemporary architecture could be much less prevalent. Based on these experiences, I define “contemporary” buildings as structures that include “modern” or international designs, such as the inclusion of windows/glass as a major theme, concrete/steel as a primary material, or cubic/box-like design. I use “traditional style” to describe buildings that feature wood, stone and clay as primary materials, and incorporate elements such as wadang “eaves tiles”, courtyards, gates, or screen-walls. Other elements of traditional architecture include attention to the cardinal directions and emphasis on the horizontal aspects of buildings (cultural-china.com).

One of China’s greater challenges is the management of historical areas, as well as remaining competitive by encouraging development and growth. Walking through Kunming, it’s
easy to tell that it ultimately exhibits the trappings of a modern city. Kunming serves as the provincial capital of Yunnan, and is the most populated city of the region.

In Kunming, over 90% of the old neighborhoods had been destroyed by the mid-90s (Zheng 2006) and have been replaced by massive high-rises and apartment buildings. However due to both central and foreign pressure, the preservation of Kunming’s remaining historical areas became a new priority for the prefecture (Zheng 2006). At the same time, recreations of these districts are also appearing. We saw examples of this during our time in Kunming.
Tourism has become one of Kunming’s major sources of economic revenue, and as with any area in China, historical sites are popular among travelers. Downtown, we witnessed a construction site set to become a complete block of shops and restaurants, built in traditional style. This was my first experience in seeing how traditional Chinese architecture was being used specifically to create an attractive consumer atmosphere.
The neighborhood being remodeled in Kunming was an example of preservation in an effort to conserve the city’s history, but also a conscious effort to capitalize on the environment that this style would invoke within a modern urban setting. Zheng’s study of urban developers in Kunming indicate that planners are happy with to dispose of old structures if they don’t align with their goals surrounding modernization (Zheng 2006). By extension, it’s reasonable that if a preserved structure is not useful in providing revenue, it becomes a candidate for eradication. From walking on the streets, traditional residential architecture isn’t intrinsically valuable when competing against modernization, unless it provides an economic draw that modern architecture can’t provide.

In Dali, the second major city we visited to the northwest of Kunming, we noticed a similar effort to cultivate a historical feel. As with many of Chinese cities we visited, Dali features an “old town” that exists as a natural center for the city’s layout. Modern buildings form the majority of Dali’s bulk, but the center would appear faithful to what an uncritical visitor might imagine as old Dali. The old town had been commercialized for the benefit of tourists, with shops and museums being operated out of former housing. Even the gatehouses of the old city have been appropriated as various alcoves to sell clothing and souvenirs. This would be the case in other cities/towns such as Lijiang and Shuhe. In these cities, where historical experiences are being sold in the form of museum visits or in local souvenirs, the atmosphere created by traditional architecture likely helps prime a visitor to consume the products being sold in these locations.

Aside from preservation, we’d often see examples of modern structures attempting to integrate traditional elements. However, the underlying concept seemed to be based off the same ideas that drive the construction of modern buildings, with more detailed attention being given to how it would exist within the larger scheme of city development and modern conveniences. In many cases I felt that the traditional elements being used felt more like a
garnish to the structure, rather than a primary motif. Flavors to give an otherwise uninteresting or athematic building character. (see next photo)

In Lijiang, I also toured an investment office looking to build a condominium complex on the edge of the city, incorporating elements of classical style. It was interesting to see the adoption of aesthetics such as the cream, or off-white colorings and tiled-roofs that were
toured, in the layout of a modern community complex. In the model displayed, there were plans for a soccer field to the south, and for large multi-story buildings with smaller apartments. From what I could tell, the designers had modeled the buildings off of traditional courtyard style houses that are/were common across China. In the display model, you can see that the complex features an ornate gate, along with a wall along the west. These elements invoke the feeling of traditional style, but the original intentions of their inclusion weren’t there. Walls were important in traditional Chinese housing, as they provided security to the occupants from intruders as well as the elements (Renping 2006). However, the complex is largely open to the view of the surrounding area, forsaking the traditional value of enclosure for the preference of viewing the surrounding area (cultural-china.com). Enclosed courtyards, walls, and gates might absorb space that could be used for other additions that the designers might desire in a crowded urban environment, but these modern interpretations seemed disjointed compared to the examples of rural courtyard houses.
Contrasting from the commercial motivations of preserving classical style in the interest of creating a spectacle for tourists or city-dwellers, the architecture we encountered in the rural areas of Yunnan and Tibet showed us some of the roots of these urban adaptations. Within Yunnan we toured several villages home to Yunnan’s various ethnic groups, most of them featuring courtyard style homes. The construction of these homes was in harmony with their cultural beliefs. In a Bai village, one of our guides explained the significance of the southern direction in orienting a home. Entire corridors would be added onto the property to ensure that visitors and residents would enter the courtyard from the south to keep harmony with this cardinal direction. Another example lay in Tibet, in how special outdoor basins were to be built at each residence where offerings (such as juniper or barley) could be burned for the gods. These additions were aesthetically beautiful, but at the same time served a functional cultural purpose. The buildings attempting to adopt traditional styles seemed to largely disregard the original reasons behind these elements in favor of merely appropriating their appearance.

A month is far too short of a time to delve into the vast topic of China’s changing urban and rural landscapes. However, the limited time that I was able to spend in the country did
provide a proper environment for me to investigate some of my views on China I held before arriving there. Within the US, similar concerns about the preservation of historical architecture have emerged, but actually seeing it in person helped me realize why the destruction of these areas is such a large issue. The urgency for protecting existing structures is much higher in China, given the rate at which developers intend to pursue their goals of modernization. Long-standing neighborhoods and structures in Chinese cities face the constant question of how they will continue to be relevant and useful. This trend ultimately lends uncertainty to the preservation of China’s traditional architecture and how Chinese architecture will change over time. At the same time, it appears that current architects and designers are seeking to reconnect with the past in their experimentation with traditional features. The inclusion of these elements may help bridge the gap between the old and new in towns that promote their history and may also contribute to the success of tourism. This country was foreign to me in more than just a linguistic or ethnic sense. Its voracious expression of development is unlike anything else in the world, and much like the other consequences of China’s progress, we can only wait to see how these changes will affect the preservation of architectural heritage.
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