

# The Analysis of the First Major Transformation of Architectural Aesthetics in China

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the first major transformation of Chinese architectural aesthetics during the cultural reform period of the late 1800s to early 1900s. Before the late 1800s, China developed a standardized building system: traditional Chinese architecture. Then, the cultural reform movement was initiated by patriots when the late Qing government struggled to maintain sovereignty under foreign invasions. Reformers pushed China to a new stage of industrialization and urbanization; they used Western-style architecture as part of the promotion of cultural modernization. In this paper, I selected a pair of case studies of commercial space to analyze the transformation: Pingjiang road of Suzhou city represents traditional Chinese architecture while Qi-style arcade building of Hainan is an example of Western style architecture. Western architecture imported into China was presented as a hybrid of European gothic, beaux-art, and baroque style, incorporated with modifications to suit the cultural and physical environment of China. The examples demonstrate that the new style incorporated long standing cultural ideals while many other aspects of tradition were abandoned.

**Keywords:** Architecture aesthetics, traditional Chinese architecture, Western-style architecture, style transformation, Pingjiang Road, Qi-style arcade building (Haikou Shophouse)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of architectural style is relevant to various factors including identity shift, political incidents, societal alterations, economic structure, and etc. For Chinese architecture, the evolution of aesthetics is also associated with these factors. In this paper, I focused on the first major style transformation in Chinese architecture history. In its thousands of years of history, China has developed a structured architecture system: traditional Chinese architecture. Later, starting in the late 19th century, with the quick downfall of the Qing government, Western-style architectures became popular. Architectures of this style imitated European gothic, beaux-art [1], and baroque style while modified to adapt cultural and physical environment of China [2]. This paper centers around the radical yet important transition between the two architectural phases in the 20th century as it marks the start of China marching toward modernity [3]. During the cultural reform of late Qing to nationalist China, Western style architecture was introduced and popularized in China by first generation architects who studied abroad to transform cultural values and fulfill economic needs.

## 2. BACKGROUND

Traditional Chinese architecture is the embodiment of traditional Chinese values. As one of the most ancient forms of architecture, buildings of this style are known for the extravagant roof designs and their emphasis on social hierarchy.



Figure 1 The corner building of the Forbidden City

Traditional Chinese architecture reflected on traditional local culture and is unique in several ways. Firstly, traditional Chinese architecture represents strict social hierarchy. Standard traditional Chinese style architecture has three layers: the column network, the bracket set layer, and the roof frame [4]. Each component follows strict regulation according to the social standing of the owner of the building. The material, size, specific measurements of building parts, and extravagance of embellishments of the architecture all depend on social hierarchy [5]. Secondly, buildings do not exist as individual and isolated buildings. Instead, related buildings make up architectural complexes [4]: one example is the Forbidden City. The Forbidden City is the royal palace of emperors of both Ming and Qing dynasty. It is the largest scale ancient architecture complex [6]. No single architecture in the Forbidden City should stand out of the group since all the buildings have similar form. Thirdly, traditional Chinese style buildings were not individually designed. Set models of designs developed over thousands of years were passed down and

ready to be replicated by semi-skilled craftsmen who were neither literate nor educated in design. Standardization and patterns written in books meant easy replicability of building practices without the need for formal education. Creativity and renovation are not part of traditional Chinese architecture [4; 6-7].

The impact of the cultural reform movement during the late Qing dynasty to nationalist China on Chinese architecture was significant. During the late Qing dynasty, the emperor and government were unable to maintain national sovereignty: China lost the First and Second Opium War and was forced to sign unequal treaties to open up ports and concede land. After that, other Western powers, Russia, and Japan saw the weakness and incompetence of the Qing and invaded Chinese territory. Subjugated under foreign power, China had to accept foreign interventions in internal affairs [8]. Patriots of the time attributed the humiliation of foreign powers dominating China and the loss of pride and national sovereignty to the backwardness of traditional Chinese values. Subsequently, they rose as revolutionaries and initiated a new intellectual reform movement. Chen Duxiu, a prominent reformer who studied in Japan and launched *New Youth* magazine, argues that in order to have a young, vigorous, and progressive society, Chinese people must “exert one’s intellect, discard resolutely the old and the rotten, regard them as enemies and as the flood or savage beasts [...]” [8]. In other words, to abandon Confucianism (traditional Chinese value system) and embrace Western ideas of progress, science, and liberty was China’s way for change. Many reformers believed that traditional Chinese culture and values were too conservative to support a progressive society like the West [8-9]. Western architecture, as part of the modernization, was brought into China by first generation architecture students who studied abroad. Having students learn abroad was also part of the movement, as reformers envisioned, they would transform Chinese architecture style and the cultural values behind it [3] [10].

The cultural reform movement also prompted economic changes. As China declined during the late 1800s to early 1900s, the West saw significant growth. Since the emergence of capitalism, industrialization systematically took place in Western nations which subsequently spurred agricultural output. Economic growth led Western nations into a new and progressive era of establishing global power and conquering land [11]. China, eager to retain nation sovereignty, sought to imitate the West. On the one hand, to foster new engagement with Western ideas and change the conservative academic atmosphere, students were sent abroad through government-funded programs to receive education. New ideas were thus brought into China. Imitating the West also allowed China to start its industrialization process. An abundance of factories was built, and systematic industrial complexes were established. For example, machine gun factories and steel mills were built in Hubei province. Rapid industrialization also prompted the construction of modern urban spaces [12]. Industrialization and urbanization under the movement

simultaneously brought about the need for practical architecture fitting for the new era [10].

### 3. CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

In this paper, I focus on a pair of examples to analyse the transformation of architectural aesthetics during the cultural reform period in China. Both case studies are examples of commercial space. Pingjiang road, my first example, is located in Suzhou city, North of China. The street was constructed during the 1200s for trading purposes [13]. Similar to Pingjiang road, the Qi-style arcade buildings in Haikou city also compose of unique streets. Yet, these streets in Haikou designed between 1920s to 1940s have a completely different architectural style compared to the former example. I picked these two commercial spaces because they are both great representations of architecture of each time period and are well preserved evidence of architectural style. They illustrate how the transformation of styles was manifest in an important part, commercial spaces, of Chinese society.

#### 3.1. Pingjiang Road

Pingjiang road is located in Suzhou city. Suzhou city has been an economic center of China early in history. An indirect evidence is the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal constructed during the 5th century that passes through Suzhou. Based on the scope of the canal, one can suppose Suzhou’s economic importance. Transportation of goods through carriage was dependent on weather conditions and took a very long time. Trades through canals were comparatively more reliable and consistent. With the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal passing through and a position close to waterways and, Suzhou was no doubt a trading center. Pingjiang road epitomizes development in the ancient city of Suzhou. The earliest record of Pingjiang road appears in the city map of 1229 [13]. It was a possible inspiration of Suzhou street, which is located in a royal palace in Beijing. After traveling to Suzhou, the emperor of Qing dynasty was fascinated by the street views and ordered the construction of Suzhou street in his palace to mimic the local views and sensations [14]. This also proves elites’ awareness and interest in trade spaces and the importance of trade in Suzhou local life.

The Pingjiang road we see today is obviously different from what it was like when it was first constructed. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, there have been some renovations on Pingjiang road so that it could continue to function as a commercial tourist site. Unfortunately, I could not track how the buildings evolved at certain points in history. However, Pingjiang road today still generally represents the past.



Figure 2 Pingjiang Road [15]

Architectures of a mixture of two-story small shops and residential small yards were constructed along-side of the Pingjiang river and horizontally stretch to attach to other narrow alleys [13]. Buildings of Pingjiang road are classic examples of traditional Chinese architecture owned by civilians: white walls accompanied by grey tiles; wooden windows carved with geometric shapes. Below is what a typical architecture of Pingjiang road would look like.



Figure 3 Pingjiang Road [15]

These vernacular architectures are highly functional spaces that lack decorative elements. This makes sense considering the fact that merchants at the time had low social status in a Confucian society due to the emphasis on agriculture [16]. Therefore, the owners of Pingjiang road buildings, merchants and common civilians, barely had extra money to spare on extra ornaments which in another perspective is the beauty of simplicity. Based on observation, the first floor of Pingjiang road architectures functioned as the store for customers to travel in and out conveniently through the side of the building attached to the physical road. The other side of the building, with stairs connected to the river, allowed goods coming from all over China to enter the store right from boats.

### 3.2. Qi-style Arcade Buildings

The second example, Qi-style arcade buildings of Haikou city, also called Haikou shophouse, works as a good comparison with Pingjiang road. It is also a civilian commercial space with distinct architecture style. Haikou city of Hainan province is also an important trading port for modern China. As the cultural reform progressed, Qi-style arcade buildings of Hainan province formed under

the influence of trade with the West and South-eastern Asia and the first generation architects who studied in the West. After the Opium wars, China was forced to open ports to Western nations. As an island bordering the ocean, Hainan functioned as an import port ever since. Trade with the outside world not only allowed Hainan to develop an economy revolving around trade but also promoted the flourishing of Western culture and capital. In line with the changing economy and culture under the reform movement, the Hainan government promoted the creation of commercial space like the Haikou shophouse streets.



Figure 4 Qi-style arcade building street [17]

The Haikou shophouse street is multifunctional: there are shops, tea houses, chess rooms, memorials, various consulates, and etc. [18]. Today, it has been transformed to be a mix of commercial space, living space, and tourist site. The architectural style of Qi constitutes a mixture of European gothic, beaux-art, baroque, and South-eastern Asia style while taking consideration of the hot and humid climate of Hainan. The actual entrance way of each individual building is behind the pillars and second-floor wall, forming a long, extended corridor that connects the entire row of buildings. The corridors permit people to travel under without getting rained on considering how close Hainan island is to the equator. The first floor functioned as stores while the upper floors were used as casual space or living space [2]. One obvious trait of the shophouse is the various huge signs on the building as seen in Figure #4. These individual signs indicate commercial enterprises becoming more systematic. Each commercial enterprise is more individualized and has a larger audience to advertise toward. Looking at the details of these shophouses, windows of the buildings vary: most are narrow in proportion and have an arc on the top, imitating European architecture. The arc element was rarely used in traditional Chinese architecture. With the exception of some bridges, traditional Chinese architecture complexes emphasize the beauty of lines and straightness.

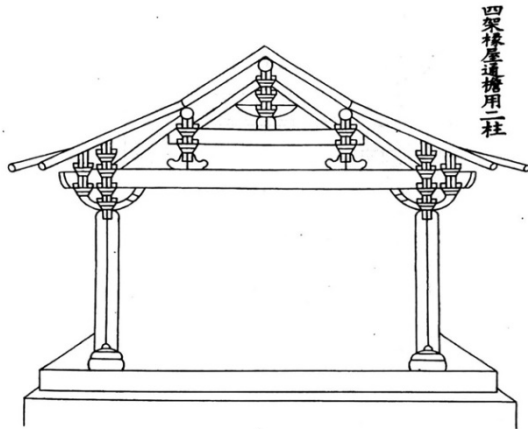


Figure #5 Design of traditional Chinese architecture in Yingzaofashi [4]

Qi-style buildings correspond yet differ from each other. Individual buildings used different elements of various artistic styles. Some are very simple, like the one in the photo on the very left - plain walls with simple windows. Some are more complicated. For example the buildings seen second and third to the left in Figure #4 have sculpted symbols under the window. Interestingly, Qi-style buildings, with apparent Western exterior design, preserve some degree of hidden Chinese values. Firstly, many Qi-style buildings chose to adopt embellishments with traditional Chinese symbols. For example, carved lotus signs on Qi-style buildings meant prayer of safety and longevity [19]. Secondly, Qi-style buildings are symmetrical. Traditional Chinese architecture also emphasizes symmetry, which was most prominent in royal architecture. Not only did each individual building need to be symmetric, the larger architecture complex had to be symmetrical by the middle line. However, Qi-style buildings are only symmetrical by the vertical middle line of itself. Part of the reason why Western architecture fit so well into Chinese society during this period is undeniably how it turned away certain undesired Chinese values yet preserves and presents the desirable part of the culture. For example social hierarchy was no longer a standard of architecture yet the beauty of symmetry was easily integrated into European style as part of the new aesthetics. Although cultural reform promoted the abandoning of past identity, the essential Chineseness must not be lost. The complete denial of the past architecture could only lead to the loss of cultural identity. Sicheng Liang was educated in University of Pennsylvania and is one of the most prominent first-generation Chinese architects. Liang contributed hugely to Chinese education in architecture by creating the first ever architecture major in Chinese university and designed important national projects such as the Monument to the People's Heroes [20]. He once said that, "in an ancient city of the east, architecturally, completely losing individual artistic characteristics [...] means the decay of culture and vanish of identity [21]." Western architecture was imported in such a way that many aspects of tradition were abandoned while other

longstanding cultural ideals were persevered and incorporated.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The importation of Western design and values emphasized on the ideas of individuality and private space. It shaped the Chinese identity of progressiveness, which continued to be the pursuit of China and Chinese people after the reform. Haikou shophouses, although corresponding in color scheme, represent a higher degree of architectural design freedom, individuality, and creativity. Commercial buildings of the new era, no longer ruled by traditions, emphasize on economic functionality but also uniqueness. It was not a mere coincidence that the architectural style transformation happened simultaneously with the cultural reform movement. Reformers pushed for the prosperity of new thoughts and ideas; these new values justified the importation of Western style architecture in China; these new architectures then strengthened the modern ideas and contributed to the fading of traditional Chinese values. This paper focused on the transformation of commercial spaces as an important place for the development of Western-style architecture during the late 19th century to early 20th century. As my first example demonstrated, ancient commercial spaces adhered to traditional architecture. The highly functional vernacular architectures reflected a system that emphasize on social hierarchy, entirety, and conformity. In the second case study, I demonstrated the emergency of a hybrid type of architecture that included certain elements of traditional architecture but was designed by western trained architects, purposed to imitate Western style. Because of this, China has emerged with unprecedented new elements. Chinese architectural style transformed from its traditional basis to Western style simultaneously with the cultural reform movement as it addressed cultural and economic needs for adapting architecture for the early modern era. In comparing Pingjiang road and Qi-style arcade building, I demonstrate how commercial spaces were transformed in line with new economic needs, and they were also the driving factor of cultural modernization, with the design of spaces which integrated Western designs for commercial spaces with traditional elements of Chinese culture.

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