



## Traditional architectural forms in market oriented Chinese cities: Place for localities or symbol of culture?

Fei Chen\*

School of Architecture, University of Liverpool, Leverhulme Building, Liverpool L69 7ZN, United Kingdom

### A B S T R A C T

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China provides a unique social-economic and political context for urban conservation and regeneration within the current trend of modernisation and globalisation. This paper investigates 4 urban regeneration projects conducted in four most internationalised historical Chinese cities from 1989 to 2005, in order to understand how traditional architectural elements are manipulated in these projects. It also examines the roles local governments, developers, designers and local residents played in these projects in the intensification process of the market oriented economy over time. The paper argues that socio-cultural sustainable regeneration of historical urban environments must make places for local people, rather than preserve certain traditional forms as cultural symbols. Tradition must evolve by the collective and traditional forms must be widely used in architectural and urban design with community involvement, in order to achieve real cultural identity and social cohesion.

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### Introduction

During the last three decades, China has seen unprecedented economic growth, urbanisation and globalisation, especially in coastal cities. Rapid urbanisation and the increasing number of rural migrants drawn by employment opportunities and advanced modern facilities in cities require large scale construction and urban development. It has taken a long time for Chinese planning authorities, designers and relevant people to realise that local tradition, as the resource for restoring cultural identity, is extremely important for the built environment. In the light of cultural reflection and conservation, a few pioneering urban regeneration projects have been conducted in several of the most internationalised cities since the late 1980s. This paper aims to analyse 4 such projects, including two residential and two commercial developments completed in Beijing, Suzhou, Shanghai and Nanjing from 1989 to 2005, in order to understand the ways that authorities and designers respond to the drastic social-economic changes. Furthermore, in relation to the current debate on tradition, vernacular and contemporary social reality, as well as internationalism in architecture and city planning, the study of the 4 pioneer urban projects in China aims to contribute to the question of how the designers decide which traditional elements are

appropriate for today's reality and how they have interpreted them with modern building requirements and current construction methods. Some differences among those projects that are carried out in the intensification process of the marketing mechanism may be revealed, which indicate changing attitudes or roles of local authorities and designers in dealing with tradition.

These 4 cases obey what is claimed to be the sensible way of using tradition: innovation rather than duplication (Lim & Beng, 1998; Watson & Bentley, 2007). However, whether this is indeed the sensible way is down to the judgement of the local residents. Therefore, the paper also examines users' response to these projects 5–20 years after their completion. The success and weaknesses of the 4 projects are worth considering in future urban development of Chinese cities.

### Tradition in modernisation and globalisation

Before investigating the 4 cases in China, it is necessary to clarify the ideas of tradition, identity, and their significance in the tendency of modernisation and globalisation, as well as the impact of global economy on the local culture.

The role of tradition in the process of modernisation has drawn fierce debate over the last few decades. Tradition represents the mass of indigenous cultural values, sets of languages, religious and a range of psychological attitudes about sex, race and ethnicity, while modernity is associated with human transformation of culture, rapid mobilisation, class stratification and consumerism

\* Tel.: +44 (0)151 794 2620.

E-mail address: [fei.chen@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:fei.chen@liverpool.ac.uk).

(Horowitz, 1982). It is now widely acknowledged that tradition and modernity are not two polarised ideal types but co-exist, interpenetrate and influence each other in a process of integration (Lutz & El-Shakhs, 1982). In China, this idea is explicit in the emergence of modernity and adaptation of western products and culture in people's daily lives, communities and social institutions since the 18th century (Wu, Katz, & Lin, 2010). The integration of tradition and modernity, on the one hand, updates tradition in a piecemeal manner, and on the other hand, digests modern concepts that are often from western culture. As Lutz and El-Shakhs (1982) claim, the real challenge of the integration is how to achieve an internally consistent order. In the current Chinese context, it's a challenge to incorporate tradition within the modernisation process and to achieve the consistent order in social, economic, political and environmental aspects.

Globalisation (Beck, 2000; Lechner, 2004; Ritzer, 2004) is a similar force as modernisation that lets Chinese tradition encounter and interact with western cultural and institutional elements. Since the middle 1970s, the trend of globalisation is marked by intensive international trade, global production, investments, competition and share of labour in economic terms. This tendency affects China and leads to various social transformation. Globalisation facilitates homogeneity in social practice, relations, organisation of social life, especially in consumption. However, globalisation would not achieve a 'global culture' or 'global community'. On the contrary, economic globalisation (Sassen, 1991) results competition for resources and a world market of money and commodities. In other words, the inevitable consequences of globalisation are boundary drawing, separation and exclusion (Bauman, 1998, 2002). Therefore, the search for identity, that distinguishes one from the other, is a natural companion of globalisation. The battle between homogeneity and heterogeneity is the key issue in theory and never stops (Robertson, 2001). In many cases, superficial identity (heterogeneity) at either the regional or national level is promoted by policy-makers to merely contest for economical success. As a result, exclusive attention on architectural appearances in historical regeneration as a response to globalisation often leads to gentrification (Hackworth & Smith, 2001; Lees, Slater, & Wyly, 2007), segregation (Lees, 2008) and other social problems.

Tradition is the immediate resource for restoring or maintaining identity. Literally, tradition is something inherited and transmitted over generations with clear continuity. In relation to architecture and urbanism, traditional urban forms crystallise meaningful cultural patterns that are differentiated according to the medium and the circumstances imposed on human expression (Giddens, 1991). Traditional forms reflect residents' self-identity and are evolving according to their needs. The use of local tradition for identity-making is promoted in Critical Regionalism (Frampton, 1992, 2000) as a mainstream architectural theory in the 1980s, as well as in the theory of Italian Typology (Caniggia & Maffei, 2001; Cataldi, 2003). Critical Regionalists appeal to integrate global architectural and technological developments into contents emanated from the place (Lefaivre & Tzonis, 2003), while typologists advocate the traditional types in contemporary design. Place is an essential notion in architectural theory that is full of cultural meanings and social activities (Norberg-Schulz, 1976; Relph, 2007). For the residents, making places for themselves is intuitively following the traditional principles embedded in the culture. On the one hand, tradition and traditional forms are undergoing an ever changing process. Therefore, it does not against modernisation and globalisation. On the other hand, in order to maintain the cultural continuity, which is essential for the identity, the change needs to be always based on previously established principles and to be done by the residents gradually rather than individual design professionals.

In other words, although tradition is changing, it is in a form of evolution rather than mutation. The consistent order in society and the culture can be achieved from the success of making places that evokes localities' sense of belonging and community. The 4 regeneration projects would interpret this argument in depth.

### Market oriented economy and historical regeneration in china

Capitalism, which is closely associated with western modernisation, is one of the driving forces for globalisation, which is also the case in socialist China after the economic reform in 1978. Since then, China has been experiencing rapid commodification and privatisation<sup>1</sup> of land, a blossoming of labour intensive commodity industries for the global market, and place promotion in cities. A set of institutional and financial policies related to the reform has been having a fundamental impact on the socio-spatial order of contemporary cities. Facilitated by capitalist globalisation, previously public-owned enterprises, goods and services have been transferred to the private sector with limited governmental intervention<sup>2</sup>. This is claimed to be beneficial for human well-being in Neo-liberalism, because of the 'private property rights, free markets and free trade' (Harvey, 2005: p. 2). A series of land reforms have been carried out since the 1980s to allow purchase and transfer of land utility rights (Wu, 2002, 2008). The responsibility of housing provision for workers has been changed from their work-units to the market. Furthermore, China moves away from concentration on heavy industries and becomes the world factory of demand-driving everyday commodities. Manufactures have been swiftly established and have drawn labours from rural areas to cities, with coastal cities in particular. The magnitude of urban migration has been projected to exceed 100 million by 2000 (Lim & Beng, 1998: p. 14). International trading and investment are enhanced (Zhou, 2002). In addition, place promotion has been conducted through the construction of landmark architecture, place branding and consumption, for instance, the 2008 Olympic Game Village in Beijing, high-end shopping malls, supermarkets, plush hotels and international chain stores. Also, there are exclusive gated communities (Xu & Yang, 2008, 2009) and dilapidated migrant enclaves (Liu, He, Wu, & Webster, 2010) in those cities.

It was not until 1982 that the central government recognized the identity crisis and launched laws and regulations concerned with urban conservation and regeneration (Jia, 2007). The launch of several groups of the so called 'Cultural and Historical Cities' since 1982 has reinforced historical cities to be conserved as entities, which has been a conceptual change from the conservation of individual buildings to a broad scale built environment. By 2009, there were 111 historical cities included. Moreover, a number of historical towns have been listed for conservation. According to the central government's guidelines, conservation aims to 'sustain and preserve the traditional characteristics with appropriate urban development' (Chinese Central Government, 2008). It is clear that these cities are not entitled to be preserved as cultural museums but to be allowed for development in respect of traditional characters. The principle is obviously too loose and subject to local decision makers and designers' judgement on what tradition is and which tradition to keep in implementation.

<sup>1</sup> 'Privatisation' here means the privatisation of land use rights rather than land ownership, which is different from the concept in the western context.

<sup>2</sup> The privatisation process did not completely stop the government's intervention. Unlike in the western context, there is still a strong state presence in the current market economy in China, which is called 'market economy with Chinese characters'.

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