



*Hangzhou - Old views (1912-1949): from the late Qing Dynasy to the Republic of China.*

# The character of traditional sites in contemporary Chinese design projects

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Abstract: China is the land of huge sprawling building projects, dense skyscrapers and brutal demolitions of entire city districts. How can a culture which acts under premises such as these, approach the ideas of restoration and preservation? On what basis can we set in motion a fruitful exchange of knowledge between our Schools and theirs? But we need to understand which values we are talking about. Briefly, this lack of perception of *aura* diminishes the value of the material nature of a building, that is – in other words – its physical support, the stones and the wood of which it is built. On the other hand, the high value placed on the copy indicates a clear recognition of the value of the image of a building, that is its form, which is regarded as being the more estimable the more often it is reproduced.

Key words: public space, material nature of the buildings, traditional site character.

There is no doubt about it. China is the land of huge sprawling building projects, dense skyscrapers and brutal demolitions of entire city districts. Yet it is also the land where there exist scale reproductions of European historical cities, as well as theme parks and traditional villages reconstructed down to the last detail, tailored to the needs of western tourists. Two faces of the same culture, firmly focused on the premise that one not only *can* copy, but one *must*. And that one can also demolish, as long as the original no longer produces that special kind of fascination that western thought has wound around it over five centuries of history, from the Renaissance to Romanticism. All this is undeniable, and so it was for me on my first visit to China. I was struck by the sheer amount of urban construction, by the prompt and self-assured decisions over demolition, and especially for us Italians, by the short time needed to implement it all. However these were not the only aspects that impressed me; a careful look beyond the noisy and colourful picture that China aims to presents of itself reveals something else: a strong desire, especially on the part of the Architectural Schools, to re-examine the process of rehabilitation and regeneration of traditional urban fabric. Which is also the main reason behind the appeal that Italian Schools still have nowadays, at an international level. So we are not doing justice to China if we restrict its architectural scene to the stereotype of *mandatory copying* and lack of originality. Instead, if we want to understand this vast country and its inhabitants, if we want our dialogue with them to offer a useful answer, we need to force ourselves to reject the outdated idea that the practice of copying is a sign of an immature figurative and architectonic culture.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ROWE, KUAN 2002.

We should not, in other words, look askance at a society where copying is not – as it is in western culture – just a training exercise conceived as the first step towards original creation, but is itself a tradition going back thousands of years. A tradition that is actually part of the national culture. We have to remember that, historically in China, the perfect artist was not the one who was the best at breaking the rules, the best to show that the sanctioned idea of beauty could be overcome, but the one who could best imitate the conventions of tradition. In fact, breaking the rules could be severely punished, even at risk of one's life. That was how it was, even if for us it is difficult to understand. Without entering into any discussion about the finer distinctions between copying, forgery and plagiarism, which would take us beyond the specific range of architecture, let us look at what the legal expert Zhou Lin<sup>2</sup>, a member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, had to say when attempting to resolve the knotty legal problem deriving from the different royalties and copyright laws that exist between China and the West; he explained that in China, “a work's importance is gauged by the number of copies that are made of it” since this is a sign of respect for its creator if his work is considered valuable enough to be copied.<sup>3</sup> Renata Pisu, a journalist and translator with an intimate knowledge of China, can help us understand the major reason underlying this mental attitude – the fact that in Chinese culture there is no such thing as a cult of the individual.

The Chinese do not see themselves as a people made up of single individuals, which is shown by the lack of any literary tradition comparable to the *Cosmogony* of the Greeks or the epics of Homer, with their individual heroes who act alone to rectify some situation. “Even Confucius himself,” says Pisu, “was careful to point out that he had invented nothing and was only passing on wisdom”.<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, obviously, if we want to understand Chinese architects' approach to the problem of conserving pre-existing buildings, we need to change focus and look at the picture from a different angle. This is the only way we can understand that the nonchalant way in which ancient buildings are razed to the ground, or the slapdash approach to ‘restoring’ ancient temples (to sometimes the point of vulgarity) has to do with a distinctive Chinese trait: the absence of *aura*. That *aura* which in the West, neither the techniques of reproducibility nor the caustic works of Warhol have ever been able to seriously affect, so much is it part of the DNA of *homo occidentalis*.

Whereas the Chinese perceive no *aura* in the products of design, nor even in works of architecture, as if they were essentially consumer goods that can be destroyed, reproduced and then put back on tourism market, with no sense of any ‘historical fakery’ that might cause unease in either the designer or the end-user. It should be noted, also, that this does not only apply to stylistic reconstructions of

2. From 1989 to 1994 Professor Zhou Lin was a member of the National Copyright Administration of China and chief editor of the quarterly ‘Copyright’. He has worked at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences since its foundation in 1994.

3. ZHOU LIN 2008.

4 PISU 2008.





*Fig. 1-4. Standardarchitecture, Microhutong in Dashilar District, Beijing, 2013.*

the architecture of the past, but also to reproduction of architecture of the present day; just recently we have news that Zaha Hadid Architects is suing the Chinese building contractor Chongqing Meiquan, who has allegedly copied, on the island of Chongqing, her Wangjing Soho complex of Beijing. An interesting point is that the developer had to pay a fine, but was not obliged to stop construction, since Chinese law does not recognise property rights in the case of architectural design.

Now, let us go back to the issue: how can a culture which acts under premises such as these, approach the ideas of restoration and preservation? On what basis can we set in motion a fruitful exchange of knowledge between our Schools and theirs? What do they expect of us? What answers can we give them and what can we learn from them on this issue? First and foremost, we need to make it clear that what we have said so far about the fact that in China there is no recognition of a particular legal value placed on originality, does not imply that, in the case of architecture, there is no recognition at all of the value of pre-existing urban fabric. But we need to understand

which values we are talking about. Briefly, this lack of perception of *aura* diminishes the value of the material nature of a building, that is – in other words – its physical support, the stones and the wood of which it is built. On the other hand, the high value placed on the copy indicates a clear recognition of the value of the image of a building, that is its form, which is regarded as being the more estimable the more often it is reproduced. And so, when we work together on urban conservation, as is often the case in joint Italo-Chinese international design workshops, we have to keep in mind that their thematic focus is substantially displaced by our assumptions. While our focus is on the preservation, as far as possible, of the original qualities of the architectural *object*, theirs is more on the preservation, as best as possible, of the *character* of the place, its spatial qualities and its image in its entirety. If, to obtain this result, they find it more convenient to demolish and the reconstruct a sort of ‘fake’, this to them is perfectly reasonable. This is the difference between us. But this, I believe, is also the chance for a stimulating collaboration between us.

At this point, it would be best to look at some examples of architectural works to explain the Chinese approach to design. Let us begin with the vast and famous urban reconstructions carried out by SOHO China, a real-estate development company, in the Qianmen district of Beijing. This is an area very close to Tiananmen Square, occupied by a complicated network of *hutong*, narrow alleyways overlooked by low blocks of houses with courtyards. These housing blocks are densely packed, receiving their light and air from their interior courtyards. The alleys are very constricted, with sudden changes in direction, often at right angles. *Hutong* are the typical city fabric of traditional China, degraded and congested but also capable of ensuring life at human scale; that kind of living which the great cities of contemporary China unwisely rejected. The urban planning project is actually founded on the idea of maintaining this fabric; perhaps to offset the huge space of nearby Tiananmen Square, the architect has chosen to preserve the density of this part of the city. But this is not accomplished by restoring the existing buildings on the site, but rather by demolishing them and rebuilding them – yet also, by conserving the ground plans of the housing blocks; thus recreating, as much as possible, the network of the original *hutong*. It is as if value was being attached to the type of urban fabric rather than to the buildings themselves, which in fact are freely re-interpreted and rebuilt with details that verge on kitsch.

To understand this mentality better, let us read the project guidelines: the declared aim is not to restore the buildings, but to “re-interpret the urban layout of the area”, i.e. the whole combination of *hutong* (alleys) and *siheyuan* (courtyard houses).<sup>5</sup> Following these premises, the design project reconstructs the layout of the original housing blocks, replacing the houses themselves and adapting the traffic and pedestrian access to a lifestyle based on shopping. A similar approach was also adopted in the restoration of Zhongshau Road in Hangzhou, albeit in a more refined manner, seeing as the master plan was drawn up by Pritzker Prizewinner Whang Shu.<sup>6</sup> His studio designed the pedestrian area, leaving the design of the single building lots to other studios (some of them are still

5. AA.VV. 2010 (1), pp. 112-121.

6. Ivi, pp. 106-111. See *Wang Shu architecture* see also DENISON, REN 2013 and SHU 2012.



Fig. 5-6. *Standardarchitecture*, *Microhutong* in *Dashilar District*, *Beijing*, 2013, *plan and section*.

under construction). In this case too, the buildings facing on to the street are almost all reconstructions, but here an attempt was made to avoid the usual ‘fake-historical’ type of rebuilding, by opting in their guidelines for a form of re-interpretation of the original features of traditional architecture, which results in a clear, more simple style. Yet once more the interesting point is not the architectural but the urban scale of the project: its aim, in fact, is the restoration of the street as part of the urban fabric as a whole. The architect is trying to recreate the original appearance of the street as a walled place by building joint walls and linking gates at the intersections, which connect up the façades and provide continuity to the perspective of the street. Once again, and with a greater evidence here than in the previous case, the principle behind the design is the restoration of a place, not of its buildings. It means the maintenance of the urban characteristics of the original physical space. The preservation, in other words, of a city model and the preservation of the human scale kind of life that such a city model provides. A model of life, let it be said, that is well adapted to the capitalistic life style of the shopping mall, but we should not be snobbish if it opens up the possibility of preserving another side of China.

To recap, in both the above-mentioned projects the architects kept the space, the individuality and the experiences associated with them, namely a more intense social lifestyle – but fitting it all into the new idea of leisure associated with shopping. Ultimately we are dealing with works of restoration that show absolutely no respect for the material involved but are entirely respectful towards the space itself. However, we should not forget that these are building operations made possible by capitalist economic rules, and certainly not from cultural considerations which by themselves would not be sufficient in curbing the appetite of the builders of the vast residential agglomerations that rise side by side, along the immense boulevards of contemporary China.

We would like now to conclude by examining another much smaller project, carried out by the *Standardarchitecture* studio of Zhang Ke<sup>7</sup>: it consists of a sort

7. AA.VV 2010 (2). *Standardarchitecture* is a group which currently comprises seven associated architects, which owed its origins in 2001 to a meeting between three young architects, two Chinese and one Portuguese (Zhang Ke, Zhang Hong and Claudia Taborda); this is not the first time the group has dealt with the question of working on existing buildings. In 2009 they devised a project to redevelop the areas overlooking the city walls of Xi’an; this was also published in AA.VV 2010 (1), pp. 122-123. In Italy in

of grafting operation – the insertion of a single residential cell of only 30m<sup>2</sup> into a *hutong* housing block. This installation does not involve copying traditional colours or forms, but makes use of an architectural language that is explicitly contemporary and globalised. Here we have a small object implanted into the pre-existent structure, which amply demonstrates what we have been upholding thus far, i.e. the beginnings of an entirely oriental perception of how to reinterpret the nature of traditional architectural and urban spaces. This little *micro-hutong* is in the heart of the centrally located Dashilar district, and was designed to show how one can reproduce the intimate scale of the traditional hutong and also the wealth of social inter-relations that this kind of urban fabric generates, utilizing a low-cost, easy to build architecture in steel clad in wooden panels. The aim of the group of architects is make the *micro-hutong* a model that can be repeated when improving and redeveloping the ancient urban fabric of the great Chinese cities. According to the designers, one of the reasons that discourage builders to invest in the redevelopment of these sites is the fact that at the moment there is no demand for them from new house buyers, and in fact it is the current residents who want to abandon them, given the primitive state of their technology and sanitation. If however it were possible to develop the *hutong* model by the repeated implanting of modern units, this could foster a new appeal for this ancient form of housing and make it feasible to set aside part of the investment for this kind of architectural intervention.

To conclude, this is the sort of work on which we can and should make a connection; to assume that it is possible, in contemporary China, to assign a value to a certain type of traditional urban space, but only if it is placed in the context of contemporary life styles and not as some kind of cultural heritage in itself. We can, on one hand, work on the important issue of the restoration of the quality of urban life and reconstruction on a human scale by working, on a practical level, with programmes connected to commerce, to leisure, to services and more modern and efficient housing. On the other hand, insisting to instil into the Chinese an *a priori* sense of awe and respect towards what is ancient, or a sense of regard to the material protection of what has been constructed, would be presumptuous on our part as well as unproductive. Instead, to work on the idea that the intangible, experiential space and the character of the place can be given value, can be recovered and, why not, be restored – this is the major area of cooperation in which our know-how can and must be considered crucial.

2011 they won the international prize Architettura e pietra for their River Terminal and Visitor Centre at Linzhi in Tibet.

8. On the Microhutong design project, see the exhaustive presentation published at <http://europaconcorsi.com/projects/268443-Standardarchitecture-Micro-Hutong>, from which the images presented here are taken. On contemporary architecture in China see also Wenjun, Chun 2014.





Fig. 7. Qianmen District, the neighborhood during the intervention, 2007-2008.



Fig. 8. Whang Shu, Zhongshau Road, Hangzhou, 2009-2010.

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