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Architecture and Tradition

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Abstract

The history of contemporary architecture in China begins in 1949. In that year, the country's social infrastructure changes. In 1978 the Economic Reform brought on another important phase in the development of China and its architecture. Since 1978, the volume of construction has expanded dramatically. “However, many architectural critics, both in China and abroad, agree that contemporary Chinese architecture as an art has yet to develop a language specific to its own unique conditions” 1. The language should form from a Chinese unique tradition. This research is aimed at exploring the relationship between traditional architecture and contemporary architecture, and how to make good use of the essence of tradition to make architecture more meaningful.

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The realities of Chinese architecture today

In the 1980s, China adopted an open-door policy and unleashed a drive towards modernization. Thirty years later, after a intense development, the economy of China become the world's third largest after the United States, and Japan with a nominal GDP(gross domestic product) of $4.99 trillion and PPP(purchasing power parity) of $8.77 trillion in 2009. China is the world's fastest-growing major economy, with an average growth rate of 10% for the past 30 years. An important segment of the national economy, the construction industry increased greatly. From 2001 to 2007, the Gross Output Value of the Chinese construction industry had an average growth rate of 22.29% (China Statistical Yearbook 2008). The Chinese construction market was the third largest in the world in 2002, with a total construction value of $404 billion dollars. From 2001 to 2007, the number of construction firms in China increased by 35.26% and the number of workers employed by Chinese construction firms increased by 48.47% (China Statistical Yearbook 2008).

Observing the vast landscape of Chinese architecture, one can conclude that the whole country is pursuing modernity fanatically. From western region to the eastern coastal area, from small town to capital city, modern buildings are built everywhere. In this rapid economic growth, modernity is usually regarded as an advanced style. By contrast, tradition means out of fashion, the monotony of “traditional form” has been replaced by commercial, money-oriented and flashy forms that most clients favour. Commercial benefit has become the only thing people pursue, the protection of tradition, environment become the secondary issues. “Chinese society lacks a serious contemplation of its social value and ultimate goal in the turbulence of globalization. The whole country appears to be swept up in the pursuit of short-term goals and the frantic rush for quick profits, speed of development being everything.”

This social reality still exists in the architectural field. Since the 1980s, a number of architectural theories have flooded China, which have resulted in a variety of architecture styles. They range from the postmodern style to the deconstruction style, from European historical style to the high-tech style. These new styles enabled Chinese architects to contemplate architectural alternatives. More and more architects and students try to design by using these new styles with the intention of making their designs contemporary and more international. However, few have a real understanding of these styles. “In this situation, studying and applying these theories actually became only a kind of simple grafting or direct iconic imitation. As a result, the buildings with postmodern symbols or KPF (Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates) and SOM (Skidmore Owings and Merrill) decoration that arose here and there were labeled ‘hybrid’ buildings”.

This phenomenon is caused by many factors. One of the reasons is the shear volume of design tasks facing Chinese architects. Although the large number of design tasks gives designers more practice opportunities, it takes away the time

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2 Charlie Q.L.Xue, BUILDING A REVOLUTION-Chinese Architecture Since 1980, (Hong Kong university Press, 2006), page Xiii
3 Charlie Q.L.Xue, BUILDING A REVOLUTION, page 7
required for careful consideration. In this situation, imitation or even simply copy become an efficient way for more and more architects. The ignorance of modern design theories and their backgrounds is another reason. It is impossible for architects to learn the essence of these buildings and design theories in the copy-and-paste process; it can only lead to the stereotyped architecture and urban planning. What is worse, Chineseness lost in the process of pursuing the modernity. So one of Chinese architects’ responsibilities is to represent Chinese traditional essence which is lost in the utilitarian society, and raise public awareness of tradition.

**The essence of Chinese architecture and culture**

China is a large country with a 5000 years history, with unique natural environments, philosophy and aesthetics result in a special culture which has a profound effect on architecture and other kinds of art, such as painting and poetry. This chapter aims to summarize the characteristic of Chinese architecture and its interaction with other such arts.

**Physical aspects of Chinese traditional architecture**

China has developed an architectural system characterized by timber structure, courtyard layout, and decorative method. The features of traditional Chinese architecture include:

1. **The individual building is commonly composed of three parts:** podium, main body, and pitch roof. 
   
   *(Figure 1, building in the Forbidden City)*

2. **As far as layout is concerned, the main building and its auxiliary parts, such as porches and halls, are combined symmetrically along a north-south axis and enclose at least one private courtyard.**
The structural system is of timber.

*Tou-Kung* is a kind of special bracket that acts as both a structural and decorative element and as a basic module for the traditional building system. In addition, *Tou-Kung* was regarded in ancient times as a symbol of hierarchical organization.
the section of Tou-Kung

(5) *Ju-zhe*(Ju-jia), consisting of multilayered beams and short columns supporting the beams in between, is the system that determines the slope and curve of the pitched roof.
(6) The pitched roof plays a key role in traditional Chinese architecture.
(7) Buildings are ornamented boldly with different colors and vivid
drawings and decoration.
(8) The structural system is exposed to the outside in an elaborate manner;
in this case, these special joints contribute to the decoration in addition
to their structural function.4

These features summarized by Liang Si-cheng, the “father of Chinese
architecture” provide a general image of traditional architecture in China, and these
physical aspects result from ancient Chinese people’s thinking and understanding
about life and universe.

The use of wood

One of the characteristics of traditional Chinese architecture is the use of
wooden structural frame with pillars, beams. The doors and windows are also made
by timber. Chinese have used wood as a main construction material for thousands of
years. Base on the structure of the wooden beams and pillars, traditional rectangular
Chinese buildings are divided into several rooms. In order to cover the structure with
a deep and over-hanging roof, the Chinese invented a special type of support bracket,
called Tou-kung, which both supports the structure and is an attractive ornamentation,
and it is also made by timber.

The difference between ancient Chinese architecture and western architecture is
the usage of structure material. In western countries, stone was largely used in
architecture, especially in church to create a grand and mysterious impression.
Compared to these churches, in ancient China, timber structure buildings were
relatively short. The most important building in the Forbidden City, Hall of Supreme
Harmony is only 28 meters high, the Qi Nian Dian(Hall of Prayer for Good Harvest)
in Temple of Heaven is 38 meters, compare to the Cologne Cathedral which is more
than 150 meters high, these important Chinese buildings are much smaller. One of the
reasons is the structure material. Why ancient Chinese preferred wood to make the
main structure, but not stone?

One of the most important parts of Chinese cultural spirit is the respect for
nature and life. Life is the main idea that Chinese culture strives to represent. This
feature has been preserved up to the present. The choice of construction material is a
direct result of that spirit. Ancient Chinese buildings are made of wood rather than
stone according to Chinese belief that wood symbolizes life and therefore is used to
build houses for the living. In Chinese belief, symbolism and expectation for life is an
important role which building has to play. For ancient Chinese, stone is an element
without life, and is usually used for mausoleums and graves.

The shape of building

As mentioned before, the pitched roof plays a key role in traditional Chinese
architecture. In ancient China, builders created many types of traditional Chinese
roofs, making the architectural vocabulary rich and various. These types of roofs can
be summarized in five basic styles.

1, Fudian roof. This type of roof was used only for important buildings, it

4 Charlie Q.L.Xue, BUILDING A REVOLUTION, page 13
characterized by five ridges—that is a main ridge and four sloping ridges, which generated a roof with slight curvature. All the ridges are decorated with sculptures. Hall of Supreme Harmony is an example; in addition, it employed a double eave hip roof to symbolize its highest status.

Figure 6  Fudian roof.

Figure 7 Hall of Supreme Harmony

2, Xie Shan roof. The Xie Shan roof was mainly used in buildings of secondary importance. Instead of five ridges, the Xie Shan has nine ridges. It is a combination of Fudian roof and Gable roof; it consists of a hipped roof surrounded by a peristyle.
3. Gable roof. This kind of roof was largely used in less important buildings such as the house of the common people, because it was easy to construct. This roof is characterized by four slope ridges and one main ridge, two slope surfaces, and two gables.

4. Cuan Jian roof. This kind of roof is also known as conical roof, and there is no main ridge on roof. The a triple conical roof was used in Qi Nian Dian (Hall of Prayer for Good Harvest). Pyramidal roof is also a kind of Cuan Jian roof, and this was widely used in small pavilion and less important building.
Figure 10 Qi Nian Dian

Figure 11 A pavilion in Chinese garden
In traditional Chinese building, the most important feature of building is roof, the ridge and eaves of the roof introduce a more intricate aspect in the form of upward-curving eaves. This upward shape generates a strong feeling of growing, or life, making buildings full of vitality.

**Space**

In ancient China, the plan of each building was rectangle and simply designed, however, the arrangement of a group of buildings is much complicated. Examples include normal residential buildings, temple, and even government building in Forbidden City. Because in ancient China, the functional requirement of palace, temple, landscape garden and residential building were not only fulfilled by the individual building, but more importantly by the combination of a group of buildings and the open space enclosed by them.

Generally speaking, Sihuyan which also referred to as Chinese quadrangles is the basic pattern for Chinese style space. Throughout Chinese history, the Siheyuan composition was the basic element used for residences, palaces, monasteries, and government offices. According to their functions, quadrangles were arranged with various size, and orientation to create different types of spaces.

Chinese culture was deeply influenced by Confucianism. “In practice, the elements of Confucianism accumulated over time. There is classical Wuchang consisting of five elements: Ren (Humanity), Yi (Righteousness), Li (Ritual), Zhi (Knowledge), Xin (Integrity)”5 Among the five elements, Ritual played the most

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vital role in the influence towards architecture. “Ritual can be seen as a means to find the balance between opposing qualities that might otherwise lead to conflict. It divides people into categories, and builds hierarchical relationships through protocols and ceremonies, assigning everyone a place in society and a proper form of behavior.” Confucian ethics concept of patriarchal family structure and harmony among each family member influenced the layout of house. The entire house plan was a representation of harmony. According to Confucian doctrine, the family was ruled by the older generation, the children and descendants were obedient to the oldest generation, and the general plan of a house reflected this concept and symbolized the power elders had over the younger generation. Take Beijing Siheyuan as an example. In Beijing, four buildings in a single courtyard receive different amounts of sunlight. The northern part receives the most, therefore functions as the living room and bedroom of the master. The eastern and western side buildings receive less, so children or less important members of the family live there. The southern building receives the least sunlight, and usually functions as a reception room and the servants' bedroom, or for multifunction space, as such as for studying or entertainment. The backside building is for unmarried daughters and female servants.

Because of the courtyard layout of traditional architecture, and the Confucianism’s influence, the feature of space concept of ancient Chinese architecture can be summarized as:

**Introversion and Harmony**

In ancient people's minds, the world was unstable and transient, not only because they suffered from so many invasions of barbarous or semi-civilized tribes, but also because of confusion: internal dissension and factional strife broke out periodically. “As a result, the thoughtful came to withdraw themselves, becoming entrenched within the safe barriers of the inner life against outward misfortunes, making true happiness depend entirely upon their own inward state.”

Unlike many foreign buildings, and royal architecture in China, which attach much importance to external appearance, these Chinese ancient residential buildings are plain externally but enjoy internal richness. Ancient architecture is often composed of small yards. Instead of pursuing the over-decorated architecture such as western cathedrals, Chinese ancient people designed housings only for living or self-protection, so that they may feel intimate and safe. Chinese people do not lay emphasis on strong self-expression but seek modesty and gentleness. The influence of this spirit on architecture is characterized by pursuing introversion. Siheyuan is a good example of this idea. The entire house was enclosed by high, solid walls with only one or two doors leading to the streets outside. The high wall which enclosed the house also protect against fire and theft, in addition, it gave the dwellers a private feeling in the internal space. Ancient garden design also share the same character-introversion with Siheyuan. The careful and sophisticated garden was also hidden behind walls, only when people enter it, they would enjoy the richness of internal space.

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6 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confucianism) Consulted 8th Sep 2010
7 Laurence G. Liu, *Chinese Architecture* (ACADEMY EDITIONS, LONDON, 1989), page 164
The spatial sequence

Traditional architecture is composed of various courtyards and the architecture element which enclosed them. The layout of each courtyard is designed according to its function. Different courtyards unit composed of different elements. Some enclosed by buildings, and some by corridors or walls, each combination creates different feature of courtyard, and provide various feelings of space. Chinese architectural space is experienced through various enclosures and different spatial sequence. The next space always keep unpredictable for people, unless a door or window reveal clue of next space. And this also creates a sense of mystery for Chinese space. Each space are not completely isolated and separated, they coexist in a interrelate manner. The openings with different dimension blur the boundaries and connect each space softly. Ancient Chinese architecture present space little by little and in this process the comparison between being and non-being plays a very important role. “the correspondence of the being of the enclosure and the non-being of space, the being of the building and the non-being of the courtyard, the being of the mansion complex and the non-being of the garden,- all these things are experienced in the crossing of the enclosure, the imagining boundary in the reversal of the dimensions of non-being and being.”8 In Chinese building, being and non-being are ambiguous. This can be demonstrated by the use of colonnade corridor. “the being of interior space progressively metamorphoses as it approaches the space of the corridor; at the same time, the interior is not restricted by that which enclose it but is instead allowed to spread out through the frames, the fenestrations, into the corridor, engendering overlapping and porous penetration between the interior and exterior, being and non-being”9. In this way, being and non-being, far and near, in and out are harmonized simultaneously and unify the building and its surroundings as a natural unity.

Symbolism and Allegories

In china, the pursuit of architectural function only a small part, symbolism was another issue that ancient people always take into consideration. “Symbols, as employed in language, art and music, were used to express the deeper meanings of daily life. With the Chinese, art is a kind of symbolism. Architecture’s specific symbolic language was developed to represent the character, spirit, feelings and ideas of both the builder and beholder.”10 As mentioned before, tree represents life, so it was used as construction material. There are a lot of aspects of symbolism in ancient China, almost includes all parts of urban planning, architecture and landscape design.

Symbolism in the garden design-the choice of plant

Ancient people imposed their thoughts onto plants in nature. Pine trees are tall and sturdy; in addition, it is evergreen even in the coldest winter, so it symbolizes a strong-minded personality. The bamboos are straight and gnarled, and it is hollow, in Chinese language, hollow and modest are relative and have a similar meaning. Plums

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8 Li Xiaodong and Yeo Kang Shua, Chinese Conception of Space (Beijing, China Architecture & Building Press, 2007), page 113
9 Ibid., page 113
10 Laurence G. Liu, Chinese Architecture, page 34
blossom in cold winter; the colour and posture are favored by Chinese people. So the natural characters of pine, bamboo and plum were used in ancient China to symbolize the temperaments or personalities such as loftiness and chastity, therefore usually, the three plants become concepts in Chinese poetry, painting and gardening. Su Shi, an eminent poet in the Song Dynasty, was famed for his affection to bamboo. He wrote “It is possible to dine without meat, but cannot live without bamboo”, and “eating no meat makes people thin, but without bamboo people will become vulgar.” Even now, many artists include architect prefer to use these plants as the starting point of their creations.

“Lotus roots are fragile, but they can grow high out of silts segment after segment. Water lilies grow from mud, but they blossom beautifully out of water. These features of lotus and water lily no doubt embody profound life philosophy and signify the noble characters and virtues people should possess in a stagnant social environment.” In ancient China, the social environment was bad, corruption existed in many aspects of the society, so in ancient people’s minds, silts and mud were symbol of the social environment, exalted people regarded themselves as lotus, which can grow from silts and keep itself clean. So lotus, water lily, pine, bamboo and plum blossom, always be used in paintings and garden in the purpose of not only decorating the picture and environment with their beautiful appearance, but also purifying people’s hearts with their artistic symbolism.

![Figure 13](image)

**Figure 13** A Chinese painting of pine, bamboo and plum

**Symbolism in imperial building- Tian Tan (Temple of the Heaven)**

Tian Tan as one of the most important imperial buildings best exemplifies the symbolic concept of ancient Chinese architecture. Tian Tan was the place where the emperors of the Ming and Qing Dynasties made sacrifices and prayed to the God in heaven annually.

Tian Tan is located at the southern part of Beijing, east of the city’s main axis. The shape of its site plan is square at the south and round at the north. There are two main building groups in the Temple of Heaven. The one at the south is Huangqiu (the Altar of Heaven), the one at the north is called Qinian Dian (the Hall of Prayer for a

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Qinian Dian is the most important architecture in the Tian Tan, it is enclosed by a square courtyard and built on top of a round white marble platform of three tiers. The hall has a triple roof of blue glazed tiles with a golden finial on the top. The blue roof expresses the round, blue sky. “The roof is supported by two concentric rings of 12 pillars each and four large column in the centre of the hall. The outer column symbolized the 12 months of the year, and the inner one expressed the 12 hours in a day (the ancient Chinese divided the day into 12 units of time instead of 24) and the four centrally located columns represented the four seasons of the year. The designer of the hall used symbolism to associate man with heaven”.

“Classical Chinese architecture was more than a practical building system. Its added purpose was to use symbols to impart meaning to harsh human existence.” Symbolism appears in many aspects of ancient Chinese architecture, people apply it to connect human understanding of the universal and their daily life. On the one hand, symbolism is a key for the ancient Chinese architecture and other art; it can help us to understand ancient architecture in a deeper level; and on other hand, symbolism was an intrinsic part of ancient Chinese culture, and a part of national identity, so it can be treated as a source of ideas, which give contemporary architecture a clear sense of Chineseness.

In ancient China, different kinds of art interact with each other; similarities between them can be found in many aspects. Different art and their creators cultivated in the same social environment, and influenced by the same aesthetic criteria, in many cases, a garden designer was a painter, so the interaction between different arts was profound. In order to understand ancient landscape design in a deeper level, researching the relationship between landscape design and other art becomes necessary.

**Ancient landscape design and the creation of painting**

Traditional landscape painting is called Shan Shui painting, or the painting of hills and water. Hills and water are the most important elements in the nature, and they are also constitute garden building; therefore in ancient China, the landscape painting and garden design are interrelated. “We can say positively that painting is the mother of garden design”. In ancient China, most garden designers were painters or poets, so it is hardly surprising the similarity exists between the two kinds of creation. “The author of Yuanye, (Garden Planning), Jicheng, was a painter. The concept of Zhongzheng Yuan came from the painter Wan Zhangming. Painter Shito was an expert in piling hills, and painter Li Yuanling planned Siziling (the Lion’s Garden)”.

**Landscape painting**

“The appreciation of the traditional Chinese painting is influenced by the traditional Chinese philosophy, which advocates observing the micro by way of the macro, and vice versa, not to be limited by a definite space and time, and not laying emphasis on the light and shadow of or the changes in color, or the detail of the

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12 Laurence G. Liu, *Chinese Architecture*, page 38
13 Ibid., page 39
14 Ibid., page 183
15 Ibid., page 183
The painter's purpose was to focus on the implicit essence and spirit of the object rather than the exact external appearance, so normally they omitted some details but stressed the essence. In addition, the Chinese painting embodied the special Chinese aesthetic habits of injecting sentiments in the objects. Although the general demand on artistic expression is indispensable, the perfect unification of the subjective and the objective was more important. So the ancient painter was faithful both to the shape and the essence, that is, to highlight the essence and spirit of the object while reproducing its shape and composition in an abstractive way and to display the characteristics of the object and the painter's own personality and rich inner world. So it was not a realistic style of painting, and quite different from the painting of classical Western style. Chinese landscape painting was created after the painter had wandered among famous mountains and rivers. He was able to summarize and digest the essence or beauty of nature and expressed and recreated them through his brush.

**Garden design**

Representation of nature is also the main purpose that ancient garden designers aim to pursue. Huizhong, one of the emperors in Song Dynasty, had a great passion for nature, the garden in Song Dynasty was described as “it was unique because they have used the inherent forms of nature as inspirations for the aesthetics; it was elegant because they use the elegant taste to remedy the luxurious.”

Mountains and water are the most important elements in the nature, so how to represent them in the garden becomes the main task for garden designers.

**Mountains**

As mention before, the painter's purpose was to focus on the implicit essence and spirit of the object rather than the exact external appearance. Painter’s treatment of mountain and water were also used in garden design. In an ancient garden, mountain was simplified as rockery. The most famous rock used in garden was Taihu stone. This limestone, was washed and scoured underwater, and features grotesque lines and furrows. Undoubtedly, this porous stone was not a good representation of stable and majestically mountain, but its characteristic- porousness, symbolize the important Chinese special concept-positive and negative volumes of yin and yang or being and non-being, and a lively and vital feeling also generated from the porousness. In ancient China, the lively and vital spirit was the highest criteria for painting. Compared to the exact appearance of mountain; designer stressed the essence of Taihu stone, and did the same strategy with the painter whose purpose was to focus on the implicit essence and spirit of the object. The rockery in the garden only help one to recall and visualize the real mountain, but not try to copy it.

**Water**

“Water is the complement of rock, so the saying goes ‘ rock makes one feel primitive, water makes one feel remoteness’.” In the natural landscape, water exists as river, small streams, creeks, torrents and waterfalls. In garden, a large body of water is not possible but a pond is a must. The artificial ponds are never be regular.

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17 Laurence G. Liu, *Chinese Architecture*, page 182
18 Ibid., page 191
and square in shape, since none of rivers or lakes is regular and straight, but crooked. Garden designers employed trees, bushes, rocks and buildings to create irregular, complicated banks. These buildings included water pavilions and verandahs; they were built on the bank and over the water, as if the water was flowing under these buildings. So one cannot easily find the source of the water, designer used this approach to achieve an illusion of a boundless body of water. The water in a garden was divided into different areas, all these areas kept connected. Different areas of water vary by size, depth and the treatment of banks. Bridges were built across narrow channels. Water plants also introduced to create a sense of liveliness to the water but not to fill up the entire water space, because they should not block the shadow of buildings in the water.

Chinese tradition is a precious and inexhaustible resource, in this thesis, it briefly summarized as the unique physical appearance, the aesthetic of ancient Chinese, the quality of space, symbolism and allegories. Continuity is the main character in the development of Chinese aesthetic spirit and architecture. Because of China’s 2000 years’ isolation, it developed its unique architecture and aesthetic, “but the corollary to this is that the architecture has not progressed in line with technological and social developments.” So searching for the essence of Chinese architecture is not on the purpose of understanding its history, but developing it in the contemporary architectural environment or using them as inspiration to seek the direction in which Chinese architecture may develop in the future.

**Chinese architects’ exploration of tradition**

Tradition, as a precious treasure for Chinese people, has been regarded as an unlimited source for creation. Architects never stop expressing traditional element and essence in their designs. Tradition as a special part of culture plays an important role in the development of Chinese architecture.

In the early 1950s, post-war construction was in full swing in China. At that moment, the crucial question was what kind of architecture would best match the new socialist age. “In 1953, a conference of architects’ associations was held in Warsaw, Poland, at a time when the whole world was under the cloud of the cold war. Architects from almost all socialist countries attended the conference. The participants agreed to ‘oppose structuralism’ simply because structuralism was considered an expression of capitalism. In its stead, they advocated ‘socialist content, national form’, a politically

![Figure 14](Great Hall of People)

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Laurence G. Liu, *Chinese Architecture*, page 273
colorful and appealing doctrine.”20 This conference pointed a clear direction for Chinese architecture in the Cold War period, and had a profound influence. At that time, flat roof and strip windows which were a main character of modern architecture were forbidden, and criticized as the “bad taste” of capitalism. So the traditional architectural features such as pitched roof and other decorative details became motifs of the national style. However, the national style expressed by these projects is simply the imitation of traditional forms on a superficial level. In the same period, the influence of the Soviet Union affected almost every aspect of Chinese society, and this lead the expression of Chinese architecture towards an eclectic style which “expresses both Chinese and Russian traditions and the superb majesty of dictatorship” 21

During the 1960s and 1970s, China had to face the problems caused by a declining economy and Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. “This unprecedented political calamity engulfed the entire nation, paralyzing the economy and causing society and culture to stagnate.”22 During this era the slogan “national form” was forgotten and replaced by “functional, economical, and delightful if conditions permit”. Because the complicated detail of traditional building, it became unaffordable, and came to be considered a waste of money. So in the next two decades, some ordinary and sparsely decorated public and residential buildings were built.

In the 1980s, China adopted the open-door policy and unleashed a drive towards modernization. Numerous new buildings with various styles designed by skilled architects from both China and overseas were constructed throughout China, enriching the traditional urban landscape with modern colors. McDonald’s, Disney and other western culture flooded into China, people came to realize that the Chinese national identity was under attack. In this situation, “national form” was held to be a potent weapon against the depredations of the West. “Meanwhile, the translations of postmodernist theory into Chinese gave “national form” the theoretical basis for restoring traditional architecture and respecting the past.”23

I.M.pei’s design for the Fragrant Hill Hotel, built in Beijing in 1982, explored a way of integrating the southeastern vernacular building style with contemporary function. The hotel is located outside Beijing in the Western Mountains. The building complex is divided into five wings, the organization of each wing determined by a series of courtyards. White wall decorated with gray brick pattern display a southern Chinese feeling. The classic window frames and ponds, popular motifs in traditional Chinese gardens all come from the traditional architecture elements. The design illustrates Chineseness in three approaches: the unique courtyard, proportions and the typical facade of the

20 Charlie Q.L.Xue, BUILDING A REVOLUTION, page 4
21 Charlie Q.L.Xue, BUILDING A REVOLUTION, page 17
22 Ibid., page 17
23 Ibid., page 19
During the evolution of Chinese architecture in the modern era, the role of traditional form keep changing, simple imitation of the traditional pattern is not acceptable and regarded as a superficial copy more and more people begin to consider the modern expression of Chinese national identity, they realize that the national identity is not merely the physical architectural form. In addition, the contradiction between the traditional form and modern technology also induced people to rethink a new way to national identity and give it new meaning. Chinese architects of the new generation who had received modern education did not look upon modernization as Westernization. They had explored a variety of ways to nationalization.

Traditional architecture elements as a part of traditional form or even the Chinese culture also possess a strong sense of Chineseness, therefore, many architects quote them as their concept, combine with their own architectural language to create a now expression of traditional elements. Pitched roof as the most remarkable symbol of traditional building form is favored by many architects.

This is a famous example of how to represent Chinese pitched roof in an abstractive way. This building is composed of four curved surfaces, the small shape of this building generate a strong sense of Chinese pitched roof. In this case, the architect omits many complex details of traditional roof, but captures the basic character of it, and applies his own architectural language to recreate the traditional element.

Figure 16 Church in Donghai university, Taiwan
In this case, the pitched roof is simplified as many white pillars; the function of it is not a shelter for the house, but only a architectural elements for shading. This interpretation of traditional elements becomes more popular and largely used in the contemporary architecture. This simplified and abstractive version of traditional element is more suitable in the present social and technical environment, not only because its inheritance of tradition, but also its conciseness and pureness of architectural language. The traditional details are so complex and costly, it was used in the ancient China to represent the occupier’s social status in the feudal society. Obviously, there is no need to follow the same pattern in the new age because the society environment is totally different.

There are other examples of how architects use traditional elements to design modern architectures. These elements include window pattern, traditional Chinese pagodas, Chinese Dou Gong bracket and landscape element-fake mountain.
Figure 19  Traditional Chinese pagodas  

Jin Mao Tower designed by SOM

Figure 20  Chinese Dou Gong bracket  

Chinese pavilion, Shanghai 2010 exposition
The success of these architecture can be summarize as modern and abstractive translation of traditional elements and the unification of modern architectural language and tradition. Apart from the aesthetic or abstractive expression of traditional architectural physical appearance, there are a group of buildings which not focus on the appearance of traditional building, but try to provide the same feeling that ancient building have.

**Blur hotel**

As mention before, Introversion is a feature of ancient Chinese building, in this case, the architect gives up using the physical appearance to capture the essence of tradition, instead, he makes good use of new material to create a large iridescent facade that will lend the building a calm luminosity. The concept of this building is lantern, a traditional Chinese illuminations, after carefully analysis the character of lantern, the architect capture its essence- the quality of light. So the representation of the quality of light become the main work of this project, and the concept itself originally from a Chinese element, it make the building have a special sense of Chineseness. The architect, Pei Zhu described it as “It has a traditional sense, a light quality…… want to give a sense of Chinese building in the modern time.”

The design strategy of this project is similar with the creation of Chinese landscape painting, which highlights the essence and spirit of the object, and combine the characteristics of the object and the painter's own personality and rich inner world.
The Chinese conception of space lies not in appreciating space within an enclosure and looking out into the space beyond, but properly experienced by means of the defined enclosure which is tensed towards impending departure or arrival, movements from a space to another. Space experienced by the Chinese is experienced through moving one’s being through it.24 Inspired by this concept, each unit in the tea house is not arranged on a big and flat floor. The architect designed a continuous stepped space, in this way, each window frames provide different scenes for visitors and diners, and they can enjoy the view to the greatest extent. This building do not use any traditional elements, and one cannot understand its Chineseness unless walk in the building. This building gives a clever way to represent the Chinese conception of space.

Application of vernacular material and construction technique are also good approach to achieve tradition in contemporary architecture.

Unlike many museums in China which take the form of traditional elements, this museum explores a new way to express Chineseness. Most of the Ningbo museum’s facade is composed of debris and bricks collected from destruction sites around the region. Some of the bricks are from the Ming Dynasty, or Qing Dynasty, and the oldest bricks are even from the Tang Dynasty. The pieces are assembled using a technique known as *wa pan*, which is a traditional method developed by the region’s farmers to cope with the destruction

24 Li Xiaodong and Yeo Kang Shua, *Chinese Conception of Space*, page 117
caused by typhoons. The architect wants to use this approach to represent tradition here, and bring people’s memory of the past back.

![Figure 25 Detail of facade of Ningbo museum](image)

Tradition plays an important role in the development of Chinese architecture since the founding of the People's Republic of China; almost every aspects of traditional culture are used in contemporary architecture. The aesthetic and philosophical essence of tradition encourages more and more architects to explore and recreate them in the new age.

**Enlightenment from master architects**

Chinese architects intend to pursue the essence of tradition and express them in their design; meanwhile they are more and more influenced by the theories from overseas, and benefit from modern design strategy, structure and material. On one hand, these new theories affect modern Chinese architecture in a positive side, and imbue the old tradition with new meaning in the modern age; on the other hand, the new architectural style challenges the old one, the problem is then to keep the balance between them and use the new style to recreate tradition to make it accepted and appreciated by general public becomes a big issue. So it is very necessary to research some master architects, and analyze the reasons of their success. In this chapter, Antoni Gaudi, Alvar Aalto, and Toyo Ito are chosen as precedents.

**Antoni Gaudi**

Gaudi had his own unique architectural language. His most creative period corresponds to the development of his ideas based on an architecture inspired by nature. “Understanding that in nature there is no straight line or plane and that by contrast there is an immense variety of curved forms; he changed the normal procedure of designing on a plane surface and launched directly into the third dimension.”

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25 Juan Bassegoda nonell, *ANTONIO GAUDI, MASTER ARCHITECT*, (ABBEVILLE PRESS PUBLISHERS,2000), page 63
natural elements and the originality of transforming them into complex geometry. However, “Gaudiism is not the result of a presumptuous personal insistence on originality”\(^\text{26}\) Although his architectures featured as the unique language which developed from natural elements, he never forgot the essence of traditional architecture style. “He thought that progress was possible only through reference to the past and with the support of the advances made by our predecessors”\(^\text{27}\) He respected tradition, not by merely imitating these traditional architecture styles. He had a deep understanding of various historical styles and believed that architecture cannot develop without the “nutrient” from the buildings of the past.

Gaudi began his career at a time when everyone looked to the past, the neo-classical and medieval building style was used everywhere. Gaudi was not an exception; he also turned his attention to the past, and treated it as a starting point. However, he had his own responses to the past. “Delving deeply into the artistic spirit of the past’s greatest achievements, he made the capital discovery of modulation as a characteristic aspect not only of each style but also of each artist, relegating attention to formal details to a secondary position.”\(^\text{28}\) This allowed him to use a flexible design strategy; he could create his own unique architectural language by applying the principles of modulation. For instance, in the restoration of the cathedral of Palma de Mallorca, we cannot easily distinguish the authentic Gothic elements from his unique additions with strong picturesque elements.

Although Gaudi’s naturalistic architectural language had a strong sense of originality, it rooted in baroque style which “was the last style to really take root in this country and in our soul, and the only living tie to the past, since both Neo-classical and Romanticism were reheated dishes offering no sustenance.”\(^\text{29}\) Baroque meant deformed pearl, and it was characterized by grotesque, distorted and irregular. Gaudi worked from a baroque starting point and ended up with a vital, fresh and natural style; naturalism was the bridge connects them. He treated baroque as a piece of material and used naturalism to carve it into a piece of art, his own art. From every detail—the handrail, staircase, balcony, column, floor layout and facade of Casa

\(^{27}\) Ibid., page 50
\(^{28}\) Ibid., page 50
\(^{29}\) Ibid., page 51
Batllo and Casa Mila, there was an obvious similarity with the characteristic of Baroque-grotesque, distorted and irregular.

To sum up, there are three factors which contribute to his success. Firstly, great ideas always came from a deeply understanding of culture or tradition. His creations grew from the buildings of the past, and stemmed from baroque style which already had become a part of culture. He did not create his own originality, but sought ideas from the essence of tradition, and considered that his work must be based on the past in order to create anything of value. Second factor is the innovation from tradition. He never made exact imitations of tradition, but “showed a living and soundly reasoned traditionalism”\(^{30}\). This had a profound effect to Gaudi, giving him have a unique and flexible design strategy. Thirdly, naturalism is the key factor; it endowed his design with a sense of vitality and fairytale.

**Alvar Aalto**

First of all, Aalto also believed that there was a tight connection between architecture and culture, and considered buildings’ beauty was not from the forms, but from the values and aspirations of the culture which produced them. In this regard, he showed his respect for tradition, but his expression of tradition was different, he appreciated abstraction and simplification as a sign of national sophistication and 1924 praised those architects who were “able to crystallize cultural forces, past and present, into unified architectural form. Merely copying historical forms was not enough. Emotional intensity and complete immersion were the ultimate measure not only of architecture, but also of the vitality of the individuals and, by extension, the nations who produced it.”\(^{31}\) The Jyvaskyla Singing Festival entrance arcade was built in simple wooden boards, without any attempt to imitate the complicated details.

Apart from looking for national identity from the buildings of the past, Aalto also tried to capture the essence of Finnish culture in other aspects. He found that love for pure nature and admiration for nature, was a special characteristic of the Finnish national soul. “The forest remains strong in the national consciousness, informing almost every aspect of life”\(^{32}\) Therefore, the use of wood became a symbol of the nation for him. In his design for the Paris World’s Fair Pavilion, wood not only be used in the facade, but also in the internal design. For example, the main hall was timber clad, and even the columns which support the roofs of walkways were also

\(^{30}\) Joan Bergos, *GAUDI, THE MAN AND HIS WORK*, page 51
\(^{31}\) Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen, *ALVAR AALTO, Architecture, Modernity, and Geopolitics* (Yale University Press,2009), page 17
made by wood to symbolize the forest and suggested the connection between man and nature. There are a lot of examples that show Aalto treated wood as the symbol of Finnish culture and use it in his designs, such as the internal wood display board at Finnish Pavilion for New York World’s Fair.

**Toyo Ito**

Toyo Ito’s work can be considered as one of the most important interpretations of the complexity of the Japanese world, his work mainly stem from his observation of Japanese consumer society and a representation of its social context.

In Japan, buildings are quickly demolished and replaced by others, with new forms and function, the image of the city is always keeping changing. “These cities have no real and lasting substance like European cities. Instead, they retain the impermanence and precariousness of a macro-infrastructure.”  

Understanding the main character of the modern Japanese cities, he developed the concept of an ephemeral architecture as the best way to reflect these cities.

Ito appreciates the Japanese rejection of permanent construction, and “in Japanese culture the idea of solid and substantial architecture, designed to last, does not exist.” Influenced by these theories, Ito developed his own architectural system.

The first character is the fluid space, in the Sendai Media centre, except the reticular columns, there are few walls on each floor, a big open space is provided for the occupier. On each of this building’s 50×50-meter floors, Ito created conditions that seem to make it possible for anything to happen. “This conceptual formulation is reminiscent of the buildings of Mies van der Rohe. For Ito the universal space of the Barcelona Pavilion constitutes one of the best representations of a fluid space which lead to a dynamic abstraction of space can be found in many of his buildings.”

The second characteristic is lightness. Ito achieves lightness by applying the concept of decomposition. Take the same building Sendai Media Centre as example, “Ito breaks the solid volume down into planes, facades and reticular columns and lightened it, so that all the parts of the building are plainly distinguished”  

The use of material is another approach to the pursuit of lightness. Transparent glass,
translucent glass and aluminum panels were largely used in many of his design for
the purpose of blurring the building’s boundaries and making a connection between
buildings and theirs environment. For Ito, architectural boundaries separate the inside
from the outside, and it makes buildings too autonomous and self-sufficient, in his
mind, the ambiguity of outline is the most appropriate “suit” for buildings.

In order to adapt architecture to the electronic age he transforms the intangible
electronic society into a tangible architecture language by making the invisible
elements such as wind, temperature visible. In his dissertation *The Image of
Architecture in the Electronic Age* he described that “architecture should be an
extended form of media suit and adapt ourselves to the information environment. It
has to function as an extension of our skin in relation to both nature and
information.”37 The Tower of the Winds is the best example of this theory. The
twenty-one-meter tower was covered with synthetic mirrored plates and encased in an
oval aluminum cylinder. The floodlights were controlled by computers, and according
to different noise and the speed and direction of the wind, these floodlights displayed
various patterns. In this way, Ito successfully transformed the invisible natural
element into visible light.

![Figure 29  Tower of the Winds](image)

From the brief research of Toyo Ito’s architectural theory, it is obvious that his
work grow in a special soil- electronic society, the electronic culture greatly impact
his mind, all he has done is to fuse his architecture with the culture. In Japan,
buildings are quickly demolished and replaced by others; this phenomenon is quite
similar with what happen in China, so his theory is useful and edifying for Chinese
architects.

The research of these three architects’ design and their response to culture
suggests that a good building is developed from its unique tradition, and adapt itself
to the current social environment. The enlightenments from them include: Firstly, the
deep understanding of tradition is indispensable. Secondly, imitation of the buildings
of the past is not the best approach to capture and represent tradition, because these
traditional forms are developed in the ancient social, economic and technical
environment which is totally different from that of the current age. Thirdly, the
research of the current situation of the society is also important, how to adapt

tradition to the new age decides whether a project will be successful or not. Fourthly, it is necessary to obtain the inspiration from natural forms and processes, and develop them by the abstracting power of the human mind.

**My project**

The project I am doing is a museum in Chengdu, which is the capital city in Sichuan Province in China. I intend to design it based on the knowledge I learned from my research, and to explore how to use traditional essence and modern architectural language in my project.

**Character of Chengdu**

Chengdu is situated at the western edge of the Sichuan Basin with 11.25 million population. “The average daytime high in July and August is just short of 30 °C (86 °F), with afternoon highs sometimes reaching 33 °C (91 °F). The average low in January is 2.8 °C (37.0 °F), with lows sometimes dropping below freezing. Rainfall is common year-round but peaks in July and August. Chengdu also has one of the lowest sunshine totals in China (less sunshine annually than London), and most days are cloudy and overcast even if without rain. This is especially so in the winter months, when it is typically interminably grey and dreary when added to the bad air quality. Spring (March-April) tends to be sunnier and warmer than autumn (October-November).”

Chengdu is known as China's happiest city, and it was named the best tourist city in China in 2007. It is believed that part of the reason for this is the leisurely and slow-paced lifestyle in Chengdu. This results from its unique culture. There are a lot of traditional temples, gardens and buildings which make the city different from some modern city that feature skyscrapers and a busy lifestyle. Jinli and Kuanzai Alleyway are ancient architectural complexes, and are composed of one or two storey high buildings which built during the Qing Dynasty. The architecture and landscape design all follow the Qing style. The dimension of the internal street is quite small, since it is ancient architecture group; the street is human-scaled, not automobile-scaled, so generating an intimate feeling in the busy modern city. The buildings there are shops, bars, teahouses and small galleries for displaying Chengdu culture. Strolling in Jinli and Kuanzai Alleyway and have a cup of tea in the teahouse are leisurely experiences and have become a part of Chengdu people’s daily life.

**The role of museum has changed**

A museum is a building or institution which houses and cares for a collection of artifacts and other objects of scientific, artistic, or historical importance and makes them available for public viewing through exhibits that may be permanent or temporary.

Early museums began as the private collections of wealthy individuals, families or institutions of art and rare or curious natural objects and artifacts. Now, there are many types of museums, from very large collections in major cities, covering many of the categories below, to very small museums covering either a particular location in a general way, or a particular subject, such as an individual notable person.

“The history of the museum as a building type begins in the Renaissance. The
courtyard of statues in the belvedere of the Vatican, which was designed in 1508 by the most important architect of the time, Donato Bramante, for Pope Julius 11, is considered to be the first architectural work created especially for exhibiting works of art39, in the 500 years’ time, there is a huge development in museum, not only in the arrangement of space, but also in the usage of material and structure. Space becomes more and more flexible and the span of it also enlarged benefit from the use of modern structure and material, façades become more various, the classical motif is not the only choice to create a museum. Museum is not only the case of diamond, but becomes a piece of jewelry as well. More and more museums become the symbolic building in different places, such as Guggenheim Bilbao Museum in Bilbao, Spain, designed by Frank O. Gehry.

Functional requirements are not the only issue architect focus on, architectural representation become more and more important in designing museum. The task of building museums becomes more attractive. One of the reasons is the flexibility of the spatial and functional arrangement in museum design, so architects can take the opportunity to realize their architectural ambitions. “This building task is more suitable for representing the self-image of architecture oscillating between fiction and function”40. Architects use museums to present their understanding of the relationship between light and space, and their exploration and creation of the special type of building.

**The choice of concept- respect or nature and tradition**

As mentioned before, the pursuit of function was not the only intention for ancient people; Symbolism and nature were always the aim which Chinese people were searching for and strived to communicate. So the concept for this project should be symbolic and reflect ancient people’s respect for nature. “Mountains and water can be regarded as the soul of the natural environment. Mountain adds spirit and water adds liveliness to the scenery.”41 In ancient China, mountains and water played an important role in art, many poets and painters used them as the creation concept, and garden designers never stop representing these two elements in their designs.

The Taihu stone, also named porous stone, produced along the Taihu Lake at the foot of Dongting Mountain of Suzhou. For a long-time surging of the waves, the stones are featuring numerous pores and holes. In other words, this stone was made by rock and water which are the two fundamental element of nature. So in ancient China, it was regarded as the essence of nature and a

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40 Ibid., page 28
masterpiece of God. In terms of space, as mentioned before, its characteristic-porousness, symbolize the important Chinese special concept-positive and negative volumes of yin and yang or being and non-being. Because of its unique meaning, it was largely used in garden design, and already became an element of Chinese tradition, and a reflection of ancient people’s aesthetic. So Taihu stone is chosen as the concept for this project in the purpose of pursuit tradition essence and nature. The development of this concept- recreation of nature by the abstractive power of human mind

**Shape**

One of the purposes of this project is the combination of modern architectural language and tradition. “Modern architectural movements that emphasize spatial effects and ‘lightness’, in contrast to the loadbearing walls and heavy forms of traditional architecture, have created a new set of architectural terms and language.”

“Modern architecture is characterized by simplification of form and creation of ornament from the structure and theme of the building” Lightness and simplification are two main characters of modern architecture, compared to the complicated traditional architectural with a lot of decoration, the simple shape of modern buildings are more practical and adaptable at this age, so a simple and box-shaped building becomes more proper for this project.

![Design diagram](image)

**Figure 31** Design diagram

After deciding the concept and the shape of the building, the first concept model was made to test the combination of the shape of the building and the porousness of Taihu stone. During this process, I tried to imitate the character of each pores and aimed to make it looks the same as a piece of Taihu stone.

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42 Charlie Q.L.Xue, *BUILDING A REVOLUTION*, page 3
The abstractive expression of concept

As we know, ancient people used brush to paint. As mention before, the painter's purpose was to focus on the implicit essence and spirit of the object rather than the exact external appearance. This is quite different from some other painting styles which aimed at the likeness between the painting and the objects. In addition, from the research of Antoni Gaudi and Alvar Aalto, I learned that both of them used natural elements as concept, but none of them tried to imitate these natural elements, what they did was to apply the abstractive power of human mind to represent the objects by their unique architectural language. In this regard, it is similar with the painting strategy that ancient Chinese people use. So compared to using camera to express object, I prefer to using brush to recreate.

Figure 32  Working model

The previous model is replaced by vertical and horizontal plane, and the pores are formed by the openings on each plane. So the volume of each pores are represented in an

Figure 33  Design diagram

(Figure34 Working model)
abstractive way, this special arrangement also provide opportunities to express traditional essence I have researched above.

**Spatial sequence:**

Big spaces are divided into small spaces by a vertical wall, but keep a connection through the openings. Such as space A is composed of four smaller spaces. It shares the same feeling with traditional space. As discussed above, Chinese architectural space is experienced through the various enclosures and the sequence of different spaces. The next space always unpredictable for people, unless a door or window reveals a clue of next space. And this also creates a sense of mystery for Chinese space. In my project, each layer of space is unveiled through the openings on the walls. The walls restrict space but never isolate it. People experience the spatial sequence by looking and passing through the openings on the walls.

**Flexible plan layout**

One of the main characteristics of modern architecture is the fluid space. The Barcelona Pavilion designed by Mies van der Rohe started a new age for the arrangement of space. This concept of spatial arrangement also used in my project. It not only provides a flexible exhibition route, but also make the spatial experience more enjoyable, just like strolling in a ancient Chinese garden. When a man stroll along a path inside a garden, he repeatedly views the same object from different angles. He experiences different sceneries, views variegated artistic forms, and gains different artistic concepts. In this museum, people view the same art through three layers of openings on the walls, but sometimes, through two or one openings from different angles or even from upper floor, this makes the space inside more interesting, however, more importantly, provides

![Figure 35](image)  Floor plan of museum

![Figure 36](image)  Internal perspectives
various approaches to display exhibit. In addition, the dimension of these long spaces is similar to that of an alleyway, so strolling in this museum gives the same feeling as in Jinli or Kuanzai Alleyway which already become a unique life style in Chengdu.

Introversion and authenticity

As discussed previously, unlike many foreign buildings, which attach much importance to external appearance, some Chinese ancient buildings are simple externally but enjoy internal richness. Sihuyuan and ancient garden exemplify this character of ancient Chinese architecture. However, the reality of modern Chinese architecture turns to the opposite. Pu Miao, an Associated Professor in the School of Architecture at the University of Hawaii, describes the authenticity that has been lost in the contemporary Chinese architecture, and argues that “the primary cause is the lack of strong collective beliefs or shared values in China today. These beliefs include life goals, standards by which we judge success and failure, lifestyle ideals, and aesthetic tastes”\textsuperscript{44}. Inauthenticity can be found everywhere in China. Fake details, unnecessary decoration, combination of two or more totally different architectural style and their vocabulary become pervasive in China, thoroughly saturating the minds of architects. For instance, the metal frame is used in the Shenzhen Development Bank only in the purpose of decoration, and has no relation with the structure system; this is the client and his architect’s high-tech lie. People tend to only focus on the outward appearance of architecture, but ignore the internal spatial quality and richness.

In order to recapture authenticity which has already faded way in the last two decades of the contemporary Chinese architecture, I use simply and pure architectural language in the facade design and plan arrangement. In my project, there are no unnecessary details on each facade; the material is translucent glass aims at softly separate the inside and outside space, and emphasis the transparent parts on the facade. The richness and spatial quality of internal space are presented through the transparent parts on each facade and internal walls. At night, the interior is brighter than the outside, so people can see the interior clearly. And the images of interior keep changing, due to the brightness of inside and outside is different in different time. However, in the daytime, the internal space looks foggy but still indicates something happen inside, increases the mystery of space. In this way, people’s attention turns to the internal richness, but not the outward appearance.

\textsuperscript{44} Pu Miao, “In the Absence of Authenticity: An Interpretation of Contemporary Chinese Architecture”, page 17
Tradition, as a precious treasure for Chinese people, has been regarded as an unlimited source for creation. Contemporary architects should learn the basic principles and roots of the architecture of the past; however, we have to realize that traditional architecture was formed in a different social environment. In the past, a revolutionary development never happen to the traditional architecture, it kept unique and created many fine traditions. Continuity is a distinct feature of Chinese architecture, due to China’s 2000 years of relative isolation, Confucian ideology and governing by feudalism. But things are very different now, China does not isolated any longer, communication with foreign countries become more and more frequent, advanced technology, materials are available for architects and engineers. In this situation, some elements of tradition are not longer fitted, such as the complicated construction process and unnecessary details, but some still have a strong adaptability in the now environment. In this regard, the task for contemporary architects is to take the old and now culture into consideration, and to find out a practical approach to “vitalize” the tradition.
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