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1 INTO “THE LAND OF COURTLY ENJOYMENTS”

An Introduction to China’s Architectural Mimicry

Within an astonishingly compressed term of two decades, China has catapulted its architectural universe years into a future in which the laws of physics no longer seem to hold: skyscrapers fold in half, buildings hover over water, and steel twists like silly putty. Architects have been breaking world records constructing mega-metropolises with the “greenest,” biggest, fastest-built, tallest, and most daring structures on the planet. But while the centers of Chinese cities now flaunt cutting-edge style, engineering, and technology, the suburbs and satellite townships are giving way to an entirely different breed of architecture: not innovative but imitative and backward-looking. Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, has constructed a residential complex for nearly two hundred thousand that is the twin of Dorchester, England, from its Poole Promenade down to the cobblestone paving on the streets. In the Yangtze River Delta, a 108-meter replica of the Eiffel Tower graces Champs Elysées Square in what has been branded the “Oriental Paris,” a faithful reconstruction of Georges-Eugène Haussmann’s City of Light. Shanghai officials devised a plan for “One City, Nine Towns” that calls for ringing the metropolis with ten satellite communities, each housing up to three hundred thousand and each built as a full-scale replica of a foreign city.

On the peripheries of its first-, second-, and third-tier cities, China appears to be inverting the paradigm of the “Middle Kingdom.” While it once considered itself to be the center of the world, now China is making itself into the center that actually contains the world.

The suburbs of China’s megalopolises, larger cities, and even smaller towns in provinces throughout the country—such as Beijing-Tianjin-Tangshan, Guangzhou-Hangzhou-Shenzhen, Anhui, and Sichuan (among many others)—are a surprising quilt of European and American Grand Tour destination sites. Tracts recently occupied by collective farms now boast sparkling versions of Paris, Venice, Amsterdam, London, Madrid, and New York. In homes, civic buildings, and government offices cast in historical revival styles from Europe and the United States, upwardly mobile Chinese go through the familiar paces of life in unfamiliar settings. Their alien homes are part of a



Overlooking the “Fountain of the Chariot of Apollo,” a copy of a fountain at the Palace of Versailles at the Tianducheng development in Hangzhou. Beyond it, a replica of the Eiffel Tower punctuates the center of one of several housing areas in the development. Photograph by author.

mammoth trend of “duplitecture” that is striking both in the minuteness of its attention to detail and the ambitious scope of the replication. Western-style structures are found not in isolation, scattered throughout the existing urban fabric, but in dense and extensive themed communities that replicate identifiable Western prototypes. Entire townships and villages appear to have been airlifted from their historical and geographical foundations in England, France, Greece, the United States, and Canada and spot-welded to the margins of Chinese cities.

The target of the replication program goes beyond architecture and construction techniques. In fact, the agenda is all-encompassing: to re-create not only the superficial appearance of Western historical cities, but also the “feel”—the atmospheric and experiential local color—of the originals through such devices as foreign names, signage, and lifestyle amenities. In such communities, millions of China’s new economic elite shop in markets selling Western foods, dine in Western restaurants, navigate streets bearing Western names, congregate in parks and squares with monuments to heroes of Western



culture, and celebrate festivals and holidays lifted from alien traditions. Hundreds of “theme park” suburbs—meticulously reconstructed versions of the most iconic cities of the West—now constitute an archipelago of the alien “other” within the geographically and historically integrated, coherently “Chinese” urban habitat. The Chinese housing industry has rewritten the capitalist real estate mantra “location, location, location” into the motto “replication, replication, replication.”

The comprehensiveness of these copies has elicited criticism and derision on the part of Western and Chinese intellectuals alike, whose instinct is frequently to reject these themed communities as “kitsch,” “fake,” “temporary,” or “unimaginative and cliché.”¹ But as this book will probe through analyses of these simulacra-spaces and the people within them, these themed landscapes should not be so easily dismissed. Far more than shelter, these homes are, in subtle but important ways, shaping the behavior of their occupants while also reflecting the achievements, dreams, and even anxieties of their inhabitants and creators.²

Gondolas are a common sight along man-made canals running through Venice Water Town, which takes its design inspiration from Italy’s “Floating City.” The pink, orange, and beige townhouses, with windows all framed by ogee arches and balconies framed by white balustrades, overlook bridges and cobblestoned streets lined with shops. Hangzhou. Photograph by author.

In the grip of a massive and comprehensive transition, the Chinese have seized on the iconography of Western architecture as a potent symbol for their ascension to—and aspiration for—global supremacy and the middle-class comforts of the “First World.” They have selected Western, rather than indigenous, residential and suburban prototypes as their pragmatic solution to the problem of housing a swelling, newly affluent urban populace. Rich with implications for the political future of China, as well as its role and “national personality” in the global arena, the massive “knockoff” residential industry is emerging as a vibrant experimental frontier and a means of adapting to the opportunities and obstacles of China’s new market economy. Sociologically, the Westernized homes and communities may well be the place where the gears of state mesh with the cogs of individual ambition, newly awakened consumer desire, and spirited bids for self-determination, at least in the arena of quotidian life.

This book is about these themed communities in China: the residential developments of the last two decades that replicate alien and anachronistic models targeted at Chinese home buyers and their place in the nation’s modernization and globalization. This phenomenon will be examined from both historical and contemporary perspectives. It is historical in that these new communities—which will be referred to as “simulacrascapes”—are manifestations of cultural constants that include deeply rooted attitudes toward replication and a long-standing tradition of the imitative appropriation of the alien. The “culture of the copy” can be situated within traditional Chinese philosophy, value systems, and power relations. And this phenomenon is contemporary in that the architectural and urbanistic imitation will be examined in relation to the emergence of the “New China” and a new social order. It will be argued that it is, in part, within these communities that the Chinese are beginning to stage sites of “otherness” where a rising middle class lays claim to economic and cultural power and even incubates an embryonic political identity.

More, Bigger, Faster

The construction of life-sized themed enclaves has gained momentum since its initial development in the early 1990s, emerging as one of China’s most popular and perplexing architectural trends. This breed of building initially took root in China’s southern Special Economic Zones, catalyzed by new economic policies in the post-Reform era (1979–present) that restored private control over land use, established housing as a free-market commodity, and opened the nation to foreign investment, with initial real estate investors made up of Taiwanese and Hong Kong financiers, as well as overseas Chinese.³

The simulacra movement has grown in tandem with a threefold increase in the number of cities since the late 1970s.⁴ In 2009, fully 45 percent of China’s population, or about 570 million people, were estimated to be living in urban areas.⁵ Residential

construction, investment, and sales have likewise increased at a breakneck pace during the past two decades, fueled by economic reforms, the privatization of housing, cheap credit, and the increasing affluence of the Chinese. Twenty-eight billion square feet of new housing, equivalent to one-eighth the housing stock of the United States, was erected in 2003 alone, and the pace has not slowed since.⁶ The total area of new residential construction has climbed steadily, increasing by nearly 16 percent year-on-year in 2009.⁷ An estimated 40 percent of the world's cement and steel is consumed every year in new housing alone.⁸ Annual expenditure on construction projects has also ballooned: in 2009, China's investment in the real estate industry swelled over 16 percent to 3.6 trillion RMB.⁹

Consumers have kept pace, taking advantage of increased income and loosened credit to snap up newer, larger, and more luxurious homes. China's Ministry of Construction estimates that by the end of 2005, 80 percent of urban Chinese owned their homes.¹⁰ The average per capita housing space for urban Chinese has more than tripled in the past twenty years, from less than eight square meters in the early 1980s to over twenty-eight square meters in 2008.¹¹ Even amid the turmoil that struck the international financial markets in 2008, government statistics indicate China's residential property sales jumped around 80 percent to approximately 3.8 trillion RMB in 2009,¹² as individual home mortgage lending rose nearly 50 percent over the previous year.¹³ Real estate prices have been increasing no less quickly: the average cost of a home has more than doubled since 2003, from around 2,212 RMB per square meter to 4,518 RMB per square meter in 2009.¹⁴

Significant portions of China's billions upon billions of square feet of new housing are contained within enclaves modeled on Western sites. In 2003, 70 percent of Beijing property developments emphasized Western architectural motifs, according to market research conducted at the time.¹⁵ Li Yan, a designer with China's largest real estate developer, China Vanke, estimates that in 2008 the firm built approximately two-thirds of its residential properties in a European theme.¹⁶ Real estate advertising and industry events directed to the newly affluent confirm the dominant position of these "fantasy" residences. Wallpapering the thoroughfares of Chinese cities, billboards advertising local residential developments are all but exclusively dedicated to airbrushed renderings of velvet and chandelier-bedecked living rooms and coax with promises of "royal living" in "the land of courtly enjoyment" or "the experience of seaside life of California in



An expansive display of model homes in the Weimar Villas community stands at the center of a salesroom in Anting Town. A combination of villas, townhouses, and high-rises surrounds the town center, which includes a chapel, commercial units, and a school. Shanghai. Photograph by author.



A billboard in Beijing advertising a new residential development trumpets, "We will never be second." Photograph courtesy of Yan Zhang.

America."¹⁷ Housing fairs, bustling expositions where developers promote their real estate, are carpeted with booths showcasing miniature dioramas of "Spanish" apartment complexes, "Mediterranean" villas, and "Rococo" townhouses.

Originality in Replication

To be sure, architectural mimicry often goes hand in hand with periods of cultural change, and comparable exercises in imitation are not unique to China. Japan produced its own collection of Western-style developments, such as Huis ten Bosch in Nagasaki Prefecture, a theme park opened in 1992 with an

adjacent residential area that includes full-scale replicas of Dutch buildings such as Queen Beatrix's palace.¹⁸ Indonesia, Cambodia, Singapore, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and other rapidly developing nations are likewise experimenting with using Western architectural and structural paradigms to construct their own themed residential suburbs.

Moreover, these contemporary "plagiarists" are only the latest in an ancient and venerable line of borrowers from the archive of historical architectural styles. Within the last three centuries alone, Russians, Americans, and Emiratis, among others, have shown a penchant for cross cultural "code switching" in architecture. In the United States, for example, immigrants, driven by nostalgia for their homelands and by a desire for ready-made cultural markers of status and gravitas, became exceptionally adept at transplanting European townscapes to the new continent. The nineteenth century saw revivalist architecture blossom in the Hudson River Valley outside New York City, where wealthy landowners such as the Rockefellers sought to fashion the "Rhine of America."¹⁹ They drew their inspiration from Dutch city dwellings, Spanish monasteries, Italian piazzas, and English Gothic designs.²⁰ To showcase their industrial, agricultural, and scientific prowess, Americans selected Greek and Roman templates, as in the case of a full-scale replica of the Parthenon constructed in Nashville for Tennessee's Centennial Exposition in 1897. Several decades later, in the 1910s and 1920s, American colleges and universities, including Princeton and Yale, modeled their scholarly utopias on the Gothic architecture of Britain's Oxford and Cambridge Universities in order to convey their parity with England's oldest and most respected centers of learning.²¹ More recently, in 2002, developer Fred Milani built a full-size copy of the White House, itself based on the British Georgian style, in Atlanta, Georgia.²² And just as the Chinese reference foreign locales in the names of their developments, so too did Americans call their cities, towns, and roads after foreign notables and landmarks. "Deities, places, famous personalities

of the ancient Greek, Roman, and biblical world” lent their names to towns in upstate New York such as Ithaca, Rome, Troy, Pompey, Homer, Aurelius, Athens, and Cicero.²³

While the device of architectural and urban mimicry is typologically not unique, the uses to which it is put by a given culture at a given time are often distinctive in the sense that they satisfy a specific set of symbolic and pragmatic agendas and are symptomatic of shifts in the “deep” structure of the society in which they circulate. What might distinguish China’s current and fervid simulacra-building movement? This book proceeds from

the paradoxical premise that in the way it copies the West, contemporary China manifests its tremendous originality. This originality stems, first of all, from historical precedent in theory and in practice. The ontological status and value of the copy in China differ substantively from corresponding Western notions. The copy in China is not stigmatized, as it is in the West, and this lack of stigma is manifested in a number of cultural institutions and practices and is supported by a philosophical system.

China’s simulacrascapes are also differentiated by the foreign origins of the originals from which they take inspiration. While cultures commonly appropriate alien architectural and urbanistic schemes to serve nostalgic or prestige functions, historically they tend to borrow from within the same civilizational matrix with which they identify. In the United States, for example, the “fakes” have been based on Anglo-Saxon (British Tudor, Queen Anne, Gothic), Mediterranean, or Teutonic models and the architectural styles and morphologies of peoples who share the same geocultural genealogy. The United States has yet to produce on American soil full-scale residential communities that replicate Thai villages or Chinese *siheyuan* courtyard homes. The various “Chinatowns,” “Germantowns,” and “Little Italies” that do exist in many American cities are the products of immigration, rather than imitation, and reflect the cultural roots and traditions of their primary residents. Similarly, the Beaux Arts or Art Deco enclaves in East Asian cities, for instance, were the product of Occidental colonial settlement and were not intended to house the indigenous colonized subjects. By contrast, in contemporary China, the dominant target of appropriation for residential enclaves housing the Chinese is a geopolitically, temporally, and culturally alien and remote civilization. This drawing on “another’s” past, then, appears to be one peculiarly Chinese approach to housing its indigenous population or, more precisely, certain segments of its own population.



The Breakers, Cornelius Vanderbilt II’s Italian Renaissance style mansion (completed 1895). Newport, Rhode Island. Photograph by author.



Dutch colonial style townhouses, with commercial space on the ground floors and windmills just beyond, line a main street in Holland Village dotted with planters containing plastic tulips. Shanghai. Photograph by author.

Another distinctive feature is the sheer number of these “alien” simulacrascapes and the proportion of the total new housing stock that they represent. Where other nations—India, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), or Japan, for instance—may have only a handful of themed developments for the ultra rich, China has billions of square feet dedicated to such projects, some already completed and others under construction, offered in a range of price-points that make ownership accessible to the increasingly economically nuanced emerging middle class. “The aggressiveness with which these [architectural] issues are playing out, the number of projects that you see, and the unprecedented pace of all these phenomena are what distinguishes China,” argues urbanist and historian Thomas Campanella, an associate professor at the University of North Carolina.²⁴ Fueled by rapid economic growth, a population of over 1.3 billion, and a muscular government apparatus, China’s importation of “prestige” historical architecture from the West is occurring on an unprecedented scale.

In its present iteration, the originality of these landscapes consists also in the novel circumstances of the historical moment in which this architectural mimicry is occurring. Specifically, China is seeking to reposition itself within a dynamically changing world in which forces of economic consolidation and interrelation, environmental degradation, and technological advance are accelerating global interdependence, redrawing the balance of power among the superpowers, and redefining notions of economic, political, and strategic superiority. The technology available to China for copying alien lifestyles is unprecedented: it has the mechanical and infrastructural capability to create cities virtually overnight. It has the financial resources to underwrite massive housing projects, recruit foreign consultants, and import expensive materials. It has a powerful government able and willing to support urban planning projects of extraordinary scales. And it has a client base for these simulacrascapes—a growing middle class that includes a population of between 100 million and 247 million consumers and that is projected to encompass 40 percent of China’s total population by 2020. (Estimates for the size of China’s “middle stratum” vary depending on base income for the middle class, which the National Bureau of Statistics has pegged at between 60,000 and 500,000 RMB per year).²⁵ With one of the highest savings rates of any major country and an ever-expanding group of over 300,000 millionaires, this fiscally robust client base increasingly has the resources to invest in the new-style housing.²⁶

A Tradition of Cross-Cultural Exchange

Within Chinese civilization, architectural mimicry is only one manifestation of cross-cultural fertilization. As one of the world’s key manufacturers of consumer goods, the New China not only produces but also vigorously and energetically reproduces everything from high-end couture to cutting-edge electronics and patented pharmaceuticals.²⁷ But while the massive scale on which China is in the business of intercultural brokering may be peculiar to the post-Mao era, the phenomenon itself is characteristic to all periods of Chinese history, even the “isolationist” Mao years.

For thousands of years, since the country’s earliest interactions with Western merchants along the Silk Road beginning in the second century BCE or Jesuit priests on missions in China in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, China has engaged in robust exchanges of goods, technologies, and ideas with the West, selectively taking inspiration from foreigners for everything from dishware to dwellings. Through the centuries, China’s architecture has provided a continuous record of Western influence, starting with Han dynasty period (206 BCE–220 CE) tombs, which scholars have speculated show the traces of Roman architecture.²⁸ Sometimes, the impetus for cross-cultural fertilization originated with the Chinese themselves. This was the case, for instance, during the early years of the People’s Republic, when Mao Zedong invited

Soviet architects, artists, writers, and planners to help design “Red China.”²⁹ At other times, as in the aftermath of the Opium Wars, foreigners imposed their architectural traditions on the Middle Kingdom.

Starting in the sixteenth century, the Chinese had already begun to selectively adopt certain scientific methods from the West. Dynastic officials were interested in the innovations but often reluctant to welcome the technology of the “foreign devils,” which they feared might undermine ideologies that served as the basis for imperial authority. But following China’s defeat at the hands of the British in the First Opium War (1839–1842), the doors to the once-isolationist Middle Kingdom were flung open to the West, and the trickle of Western ideas, settlers, and goods turned into a flood. Before long, the influence of foreigners was writ large on the urban plan and buildings of China, particularly in the country’s concession territories. Under the Treaty of Nanjing, signed in 1842, the British gained access to five Treaty Ports (Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo, Shanghai, and Shamian Island), which they could use for foreign residence and trade. The European settlers imported their own approaches to urban planning—applying Western standards for population densities, street layouts, spatial orientation, and building forms—that resulted in neighborhoods with an urban fabric completely distinct from the traditional Chinese city. Qingdao and Tianjin were among the foreign concessions in China controlled by European powers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the architectural DNA of these locales still records the presence of the Westerners, who brought with them churches, alien planning principles, and neoclassical design.

During the early years of the “Mao Era” (1949–1976), Mao Zedong and his young government developed close ties with the ideologically compatible Soviet Union and invited consultants to become intimately involved with the planning of Chinese cities. The architecture of the Soviet Union was “seen in China as an appropriate way of celebrating the socialist revolution and a newfound sense of nationalism. . . . Some prominent buildings . . . were even designed by Russian architects.”³⁰ Until the chill in Sino-Soviet relations in the early 1960s, China took a great deal of its urban planning and architectural cues from the Soviet Union. Over eleven thousand Russian advisers, particularly those with technical knowledge, arrived in China to share their expertise with the new socialist society, and more than thirty-seven thousand Chinese traveled to the Soviet Union for training, especially in technical disciplines.³¹

Between the bookends of the Han dynasty’s integration of Roman architectural elements, and the Maoist adoption of Soviet neoclassicism and concrete apartment blocks, China has a long-standing tradition of appropriating alien architecture. Although familiarity with Western building forms informs China’s choice of a replication model, it is only one factor contributing to the current movement in architectural mimicry.



The Euro- and America-centric orientation of China's residential communities signals a rupture with both traditional indigenous housing design and the most recent socialist residential typologies. It also—and more suggestively—represents a marked departure from China's previous engagements with foreign architecture on home terrain. Unlike earlier examples of architectural appropriation, the copycat communities of the present take the incorporation of Western design to new extremes.

The “epigonic” architecture of the past is characterized by more selective and partial appropriation of Western typologies and styles. By contrast, the contemporary examples of architectural mimicry duplicate both discrete buildings or building types and the very communities within which these were originally embedded. In addition, the current wave of appropriations is distinguished by its anachronisms. While earlier appropriations strove to emulate the most advanced architectural motifs, the simulacrascapes of the present draw on historical Western styles. For example, Holland Village (Shanghai) and Venice Water Town (Hangzhou) specifically focus on mimicry as a conscious and deliberate antiquarianism. They duplicate European sites that enshrine the past. Moreover, these Western forms, as opposed to, say, the French concessions in Shanghai or Tianjin, were built by and for the Chinese, not for overseas Europeans. Although the first Western-style communities in post-Reform China were initially aimed at foreign expatriates, since the late 1990s these residences have enjoyed a surge in

Chateau Zhang Laffitte, Zhang Yuchen's \$50 million replica of the Chateau Maisons-Laffitte, was constructed using over ten thousand photographs of the seventeenth-century castle and the same Chantilly stone used in the French original. Beijing. Photograph by Ophelia Chong.

popularity among Chinese consumers, who are now able to afford and eager to acquire these homes. The residential developments considered in this analysis will be those targeted at, and inhabited by, local Chinese rather than foreigners.

Beyond “Backward”

Despite the nation’s history of cross-cultural exchange, these latest manifestations of Western form have not been wholeheartedly accepted. Within China itself, opinion on the merits and value of these simulacra is divided. The Chinese intellectual elite—the nation’s more progressive urban planners, scholars, architects, and journalists—have followed these developments with confusion, criticism, controversy, and no small amount of disbelief. Tong Ming, a professor of architecture at Tongji University puzzles, “Why should we have foreign styles in these new towns? Why not Chinese? It’s not a good feeling for some Chinese people, primarily those from cultural fields and intellectuals.”³² In an article on urbanization in China, journalist Zhou Jian remarks that in the case of “French-style” and “British-style” garden cities, logic and reason do not seem to factor into decision making and that these “theme park” habitats not only leave observers feeling befuddled, but also, more important, fail to take into account Chinese citizens’ lifestyle needs.³³



Fountains line the entrance to the English County development in Kunshan, which boasts to potential residents that its homes incorporate “classical English architectural concepts.” Photograph from SouFun.com.

Unable to decipher a rationale for a vision that seems anathema to the modernizing impulses that drive so much of Chinese urban planning, Chinese and foreign observers alike have criticized and even ridiculed these residential “theme parks.” The writers of *Urban China* magazine dismiss the theme-towns as manifestations of “trash culture.”³⁴ The journal *Shanghai and Hong Kong Economy* describes British-style Thames Town, in Shanghai, as a “controversial landmark” and criticizes these theme-towns as representing a failure to cultivate a local architectural dialect and slavishly imitating the West at the expense of local culture.³⁵ “A lot of people

were quite against such an idea [building developments in a European style],” observes Tong.³⁶ Indeed, the *Architectural Journal* discusses the controversy simulacra-building projects have generated among architects and townspeople, who frown on the theme-towns for imitating Western identities instead of creating their own and examines how city planners have grappled with the problem of ensuring that these developments had a suitably recognizably Western feel.³⁷ Many architects working in China say that despite being consistently approached to design themed “fantasiescapes,” they decline