Preservation of Traditional Buildings with Heritage Value in Asian Cities with Colonial Background – Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong cases

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Abstract

Traditional European Architecture had marked a deep footprint to a number of Asian cities during the 19th Century as the pace of colonial expansion intensified. Cities such as Tianjin, Qingdao, Dalian, Shanghai, Xiamen, Guangzhou, Hong Kong or Singapore, still have a significant amount of traditional buildings remained inside the cities under an acceptable condition.

The past twenty years have been a fast-moving era. In the name of development many of these traditional buildings with heritage value were knocked down to give way to modernization or any reasons which developers can name. Hong Kong may be the most suffered city where majority of her traditional buildings have been removed for rapid social or economical developments. Fortunately, no matter due to a well-awareness of this heritage or slowness in the development of a city, a large amount of old buildings can still be found in a lot of Asian cities that able to reflect the old glories of an era of tasteful architecture. This paper tries to review what are still remaining in the Asian cities in particular in some fast developing one including Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong which both were under strong British influence. The paper would also highlight what these cities have done as a strategy to preserve this heritage from an urban development prospective.

Keywords Colonial architecture, town houses, old city preservation, urban development

INTRODUCTION

There are numerous cities in East Asia with recorded history more than a thousand years. Almost all of these cities are found within China, one of the four most ancient civilizations in the world. However, there is no city in the eastern part of Asia that her original layout and buildings can still be traced back to two hundred years ago. If there are still some old buildings remained in Asian cities, such as the imperial palace in Beijing, or huge number of other royal residences, monasteries and temples in other part of China, they are all scattered in isolated locations within cities or beyond. As a result, these places or buildings with high heritage value can hardly form a cultural focus and bring up their own characteristic and identity in the present urban environment of a city.

On the other hand, the variety and styles of architecture in a city built in different period do reflect the background and personality of a city. They also formed a kind of asset that recorded the history of the place. Without a systematic approach to preserve these heritage buildings in particular in the recent fast changing social environment, historical cities may just look like an well off and energetic young man who acquired his wealth through rapid economic expansion but without any inner content no matter how prosperous they are.

Contemporary China is unique in the history of mankind. China is a united country for more than 2 thousand years and has never been ruled by foreign nation or became a colony of any country. However, starting from early 19th Century, under the rising power and colonial expansion of the western countries, the power of China had declined within half a century that the entire country became a semi-colony under the control and influence of various world powers including the Imperial Japan. This was particularly obvious for cities along the coast on the eastern and southern part of
As a result, besides economic or other political influences, the city planning, urban development and architecture style were highly westernized that merged with the traditional Chinese culture and created a unique taste which can be called as the colonial style of architecture.

20th Century for China was another hard time. The Empire of Ching Dynasty who had signed a series of “Unequal Treaty” with the western world powers fell down in 1910. Immediately followed was the 30-year civil war between various war-lords and the left and right political parties. Before the final settlement, the Japanese Invasion War began in 1937 that lasted for another 8 years. At the end of the bloody fight against Japanese invasion, 4 more years of civil war started between the Communist and the National Parties (Kuomingtang) until the communist took over China in 1949. During this period, there was almost no development in any city in China except relatively small-scale projects inside the common concession areas (special rental zones) in some of the coastal cities under strong influence of the western powers. In this respect, some remarkable buildings with historical significance still remained in these cities.

Other countries in the eastern part of Asia of course have their own historical and developmental background. Though only a few of the countries in this area had been a colony under the direct control of the western powers like the British, French or the Portuguese, however, almost all countries in this part of the world were deeply under the political influence of the western powers for nearly two centuries (including the United State at the later stage). Western architecture still had its influence to the development of cities in particular in the South East Asia including Hong Kong, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, but of course they were in a much smaller scale when compare to cities in China.

In order to elaborate the current situation, the cities of Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong are highlighted due to their uniqueness in their historical and developmental background.

**SHANGHAI**

**Development background and existing condition**

The history of Shanghai can be dated back to more than 1200 years. The rising of Shanghai as a medium-size city started about 500 years ago. She became a trading city with denser population after mid-19th Century by the time she was opened under the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 as one of the five ports with free access to foreign powers for settlement and trading. Due to her convenient geographic location situated at the mouth of the Yangtze River, Shanghai was rapidly developed into an active port for the establishment of export/import trade, manufacturing, shipping and finance centre which linked China with the outside world.

As the city developed, other social and economic activities in Shanghai also expanded. This attracted large number of investment and further expedited the urbanization of Shanghai as a modern city by the end of the 19th Century. As a result, a lot of buildings with strong western influences were built within that time until the Japanese occupation in 1937. These kind of buildings included churches, consulate buildings, commercial and institutional premises, schools, residential houses, industrial buildings like factories, warehouses and wharf. These buildings were seldom built in isolated condition. They were constructed and developed in clusters forming well-structured communities and functional centers.

There were only limited amount of buildings being built in the 1930s and 1940s due to the social instability caused by the Japanese invasion and the civil war. The situation became even worst after 1949 because of the taking over by the communist party. The country soon entered into another political turbulent period until the mid 1970s. During this period, all the buildings including those with high heritage value were took over by the government and redistributed to people or units who were in
need of resettlement. Due to limited supply, buildings were very congested and housed with unreasonable number of families within a building or even within a compartment unit. Some were casually allocated for use as offices by the state or municipal government, or even as quarters for the state-owned enterprises. Accompanied with the lack of fund, this arrangement made all the buildings deteriorated in a short time, looked shabbily and maintained in a very poor condition. And of course, this did not happen only in Shanghai but applied to all cities in China throughout that period.

China adopted the economic open-door policy in the late 1970s in which Shanghai was one of the swiftest city to open herself to the outside world due to her strong industrial and economical background as well as her usual proactive attitude in the facing of change and development. Shanghai rapidly retook her position as centre for foreign trade and investment and continued to serve as a gateway to go inward into the other part of eastern China. To accommodate the need of growth, Shanghai launched a series of expansion scheme in early 1990s including the development of Pudong on the east bank of Huang Pu River into a new finance and business centre. Some state or private investments were also involved in the redevelopment of the old city zones by knocking down the old buildings for business or residential uses. In some locations, old buildings were reconditioned and altered to serves other functions but in majority they were used as commercial purposes due to quicker return of money. Such process was carried out in the entire 1980s in a loosely structured manner. However, as the gaining of more experience in the redevelopment process both by the government, investors and developers in particular after the mid 1990s, a more definite development pattern was achieved with better balance between social and economical needs, as well as able to preserve the existing community and heritage buildings.

Method to preserve the heritage buildings

In view of the importance of preserving the remaining buildings with heritage value, the municipal government of Shanghai has conducted a series of survey and research since the late 1980s to identify the condition of such buildings and to stipulate guidelines for the implementation of the preservation plans. As a result, a study report known as the “Planning Strategy for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage and Historical City of Shanghai” was released in 1991. As recommended in the report, various locations with special cultural identity within the city were highlighted. Further measures were also proposed to protect particular buildings or cultural zones with special historical or architectural value. With the gradual enforcing of the preservation works as part of the urban restructuring process using the recommended guideline based on pioneer projects, the proposal as stipulated in the report was finally passed as a statutory act for mandatory enforcement in late 2002.
According to the principle as set in the guideline, buildings with the following features can be regarded as having high heritage value that worth protection and preservation.
- The structural style, construction method or architectural design of the building was unique and represented the state-of-the-art technology of the period they were built.
- Buildings adequately reflected the regional characteristic or culture of Shanghai.
- Buildings designed by prominent architects.
- Buildings that formed a milestone effect in the developmental history of the city.
- Other buildings with special historical significance.

Based on these principles, about 400 locations with buildings possessing such identities were listed under protection control since 1989. Under the control requirements, buildings or protected zones within the list are not allowed to carry out any alteration works without the approval of the authority. In case of repair, upgrading or other alteration works are to be implemented, such works should be strictly controlled in particular where involving the building structure, spatial layout, façade, or even the materials and colour of the original building. Besides protecting the buildings as a single unit, the nearby environment is also considered in order to preserve the unique culture and community form of the associated areas as a whole.

**Special features of buildings in Shanghai**

There are two main categories of heritage architecture in Shanghai. One was of government, institutional or corporate-owned properties like government headquarters, consulate buildings, banks, hotels or other commercial/office complexes. The other is residential buildings. The architectural style and structural form for the former category of buildings were purely western-looked with a strong neo-classical design taste which was typically found in Europe or in the States in the turn of the 20th Century.
Another form of architecture that marks a unique image to Shanghai was the residential houses that scattered all over the old city districts. Again, these were of two distinctive types. One was the deluxe houses which was usually detached and sometimes provisioned with a garden for the richer social classes. The other was common houses for ordinary people often constructed in row form with common access lanes in between. Rows of these houses were often arranged in a congested manner with very limited open area in order to maximize the utilization of land. The houses on the perimeter rows by nature formed a physical boundary that made the houses and access lanes inside become more secure and private. This kind of residential clusters gradually became a common design which could be found almost everywhere within the old city and created a special culture of her own due to this confined neighbourhood environment. A special name was given to this kind of living environment, known as “Li Nong”, meaning semi-common living spaces where people can handle their daily life conveniently within.

High-rise apartment buildings started to appear in Shanghai in the late 1920s as more advanced technology evolved. These buildings could sometimes construct up to 15 storeys and provided with escalator for the convenience of access. They were the market focus for the middle-income citizens. Majority of these residential houses or buildings were products from property developers. They were built mainly to satisfy different market needs. For the richer classes, these houses were designed and constructed in a modest manner, adequately decorated both in the interior and exterior, and looked fashionable according to the latest European standard. While buildings for the common classes such as those row houses in Li Nong, they were mainly mass-produced commodities with the minimal facilities just to satisfy the basic need of living for common or even low-income people. As a means for market attraction, sometimes some innovative designs either in the building layout or the provision of minor architectural detail were also introduced. As a result, the architectural style of these houses even for common people still exhibited numerous varieties and features. There are more than 5000 blocks of historical buildings in various types and countless row houses built between 1890 to 1935 remained in the city area of Shanghai at present, making Shanghai looks like a world expo for international architecture.

GUANGZHOU

Development background and existing condition

Guangzhou was an ancient city with history which can date back to more than 1500 years. She became an important trading city since the 16th Century as an export centre to Middle East and Europe. She was famous as one of the gate cities of the Silk Road at sea. Guangzhou was a very prosperous place rich in local products including tea, sugar, silk, spices, porcelain and other craft products. European countries mainly the British and French, had set foot into Guangzhou in the late 18th Century, mainly for import and export trade as well as religion missionary purposes. Due to the extremely unbalanced foreign trade situation, the import trade soon became opium smuggling by the British in order to balance the trade deficit. The relationship between the Chinese and the western countries grew much worsen after early 19th Century and finally led to the outbreak of the first opium war in 1841. Due to the loss in the war, Guangzhou became also one of the five ports opened to the western powers after the signing of the Nanking Treaty in 1842.

Guangzhou was about 200 km north of Hong Kong, at that time the only colony of British in East Asia, or 10 hours sailing distance downstream along the Pearl River. Guangzhou was regarded by the British as the gate to enter into the southern and central part of China for trade and political developments, as well as a base linking Hong Kong to strong-hold the entrance into East Asia from Europe through the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. Though the foreign powers in particular the British wished
to engage deeper in all aspects of activities in Guangzhou similar to Shanghai, they could hardly do more except in the development of import and export trades. The situation got changed in 1856 after the second opium war. As one of the compensation received from China, the British and French occupied a piece of land on the north bank of Pearl River near the heart of the old city under a special rental agreement. Buildings like churches, schools, properties for consulates and their family, business headquarters or alike started to be constructed by westerners since then but mainly confined to this occupied land called Shamian. Accompanied by other developments in relation to political, social and economical activities, small amount of other buildings were also built by the British and French in the inner city of Guangzhou. These buildings in majority were for trading or missionary purposes, some were under partnership with local merchandises. The influence was far behind that in Shanghai.

Photo 6, service lanes inside blocks of old houses forming close communal spaces in the old city. Photo 7, old and shabby buildings soon be removed with high-rise residential towers as the background.

One thing that Shanghai could not acquire was that Guangzhou had huge number of emigrants who went to overseas countries since the end of 18th Century to escape from social riots and for living. With more than half a century of settlement and development in those countries, many of these emigrants got rich in particular those staying in South East Asia which had greater influence by the western culture and architecture. As a tradition, majority of these emigrants would return to their homeland to buy land and build houses for their family or for retirement. Some of the buildings built in this way had mixed with some architecture styles which the emigrants saw overseas. This led to a very interesting development and created a unique style of architecture in the southern part of China which was an arbitrary mix of numerous architectural forms including some of the tradition Chinese style. One very typical example in Guangzhou was row buildings with covered walkway under the balcony which formed a continued aisle for pedestrian. This kind of walkway served to protect pedestrian from sun and rain that particularly suit the tropical and rainy weather in southern China. While the units on ground floor were good shop fronts for retail or other business activities making the building design created effective social and economic value in the city. There are still a great number of such buildings remained in Guangzhou at present though she has undergone wars and political instabilities similar to other places in China during the early to middle 20th Century. Many of these buildings were grouped within close neighbourhood forming a very unique community, and separated in between by main streets and pedestrian lanes.

The threat and method to preserve the heritage buildings

Guangzhou has experienced a very rapid economical expansion after the late 1970s due to china’s adaptation of the economic open-door policy. Overseas investors have drained in money to set up their manufacturing and trading bases here associated with large amount of other property developments. Within 2 decades of rapid development, many buildings in the old districts of Guangzhou have been removed to give room for new housing estates, commercial complexes, highway and other related infrastructure developments. The old buildings being removed in the process of development in
majority were residential blocks which were constructed in 1920 to 30s. The heritage value of these buildings was not too high due to the poor conditions they have been utilized and maintained. However, as a cultural and communal unity, this kind of urban uniqueness has been erased forever. It is estimated that more than 40% of the old buildings representing the traditional characteristic of Guangzhou have been removed since the 1980s.

One milestone incident that worth mentioning here was the period from 1996 to 2001 during which Guangzhou had implemented two very important infrastructure development projects, that was, the construction of the Guangzhou Metro Line 1 and 2 as well as the 35 km-long City Inner Circuit Route. The alignment of these two transportation lines cut through part of the busiest old city district situated with 80% of the traditional townhouses majority of which were built 80 years ago. Though the routing alignments had been selected carefully including the avoidance of some buildings with high heritage value, the devastating of large area inside the old city zone was in fact unavoidable. This situation was particularly disrupting in some areas located with the metro stations where property developments were included and formed part of the funding support for the construction of this public transportation project. On the other hand, this kind of redevelopment still has its function to upgrade the urban environment of an aged city if the planning and implementation of the project is done with a more strategic, systematic and longer term eyesight.

Photo 8, in Liwan district, the oldest zone of the Guangzhou city, undergone a large-scale redevelopment as part of the Guangzhou Metro Line and City Inner Circuit Route re-structuring works

As the awareness to protect these traditional buildings increased and to preserve at least part of the cultural shape of the Guangzhou old city, the municipal government has released an act for the “Protection of the Historical City of Guangzhou” in 1998. This act together with other relevant planning notes has set the principles and marked the zones within the city where preservation should be enforced. However, the detail as set in the act and the onward implementation practices are less effective when compare to similar acts launched by Shanghai. Market force is still the dominating power controlling the quality and speed of transform of the old city.

**HONG KONG**

**Development background and existing condition**

Hong Kong was only a small fishing village in the early 19th Century. She was occupied by the British in 1842 and became her colony under the Nanking Treaty. Within half a century the British and her agents had set up an efficient work system in Hong Kong with all the required support for governance, public administration or trade related establishments. As a result of this, large number of buildings duplicating the architectural style of British was built. These buildings were located mainly in the
central part of the Hong Kong Island including the governor house, government headquarters, churches, barracks, schools, quarters for officials or other public facility buildings. Since Hong Kong was one of the major trading centers of British in East Asia, other business or trade related facilities such as headquarters for UK-based business firms, office buildings, shopping arcade and warehouse, were also built in large number.

Due to the relative stable political and social environment when compared to Mainland China, Hong Kong had attracted a lot of immigrants from China since 1940s, many of them were bringing along with them large amount of capital and able to set up their business readily in Hong Kong. As a result, property development for business or residential purposes was very active that allowed Hong Kong to expand rapidly in a short period of time after the war.

The style of architecture in Hong Kong went in an extreme way. Some of the buildings being constructed were in exactly western-look based on the design from architects coming from England. On the other hand, some were of traditional Chinese style following the trend in Guangzhou for the close relationship between the two places both in tribal, cultural, social and economical reasons. This situation continued in a steady manner until the Second War World. After the war, China went into the hand of the communist and Hong Kong returned back to the British. Growth continued slowly as it was until 1970s when Hong Kong undergone her economic took-off and became an industrial and business centre in Asia. The following two decades were the peak period of growth, with population increased by about one million every ten years since the 1970s. This brought a very large demand in all kinds of buildings. Unlike Shanghai and Guangzhou, the territory of Hong Kong is small and hilly without plenty of land for expansion. The ways to obtain land is by cutting into the hill slope, reclamation or to demolish any buildings with low commercial value. As a result, except for those buildings owned by the government, most of the old buildings in whatever condition were being
removed to give way for new development with huge commercial return. Except for very few locations in small patches in Central District on the Hong Kong Island, there is no place in Hong Kong at present where the trace of the past can be found back to forty years ago.

**Measures taken to preserve the heritage buildings**

Scarcity of land in Hong Kong makes the value of land beyond imagination for common people, in particular under the mentality of pure profit-driven business environment. The high land-price policy as set by the previous government could also be regarded as a member of this system. There is nothing to say about developers who acquired land in the downtown areas with buildings of high heritage value inside and knocked them down for redevelopment. This situation continues even up to the present moment. One of the reasons that the situation cannot be stopped is that there is no regulation in Hong Kong to forbid private sectors to redevelop their properties for business consideration. The government has no authority to list any private property into preserved zone and stop it from redevelopment. It was even worst that, in the name of urban development and government revenue, very prestigious architecture such as the previous Post Office Building or the Hong Kong Club in Central in the 1970s, were being demolished and sold to private developers by public auction or other commercial arrangements. Similar situation also applied to properties belonged to the Catholic Church, statutory bodies or other privileged organizations.

As a better-than-nothing measures to slow down the devastation process, the government has established a statutory organization known as the Land Development Council in 1988 to coordinate and implement some urban renewal projects being approved through other legislative process. This establishment was not planned as a strategic approach to control the overall situation due to the government’s adaptation of the non-intervene policy and allow market decision to rule. The role of the Council was thus confined to the identification, negotiation, analyses and finally making recommendation for the execution of selected projects. In 1996, the government released a consultation paper on Urban Renewal emphasizing the concern of government in the urgency to renew the aging urban environment. It also aimed to set up principles and implementation guidelines for land acquisition, resumption and making compensation, as well as in the planning and implementation of the approved renewal projects. Though the concept for quality urban renewal has been addressed, immediate action to preserve buildings or districts with high heritage value is still undefined. The only remaining power to control or to stop major devastation of the old buildings by now seems only public pressure as voice out from various political parties, non-government agencies, professional bodies or other concerning publics. Fortunately, to certain extent, this works.

**COMMON PROBLEMS IN THE PRESERVATION OF HERITAGE BUILDINGS**

Countries in the East Asia grow in an extremely fast pace after the 1970s. In order to satisfy the need of growth in those relatively less developed countries starting from scrap without long term consideration to the society in a holistic way, the removing of the old things and rebuild them by new is the easiest way to achieve economical results. Many historical cities especially in China are actually having their heritage buildings being completely removed in the process of growth. Situation is much improved in the past decade due to the rising of the awareness in the preservation of this valuable assets. Though it is already late for countless beautiful buildings and communities bearing cultural significance have been erased forever, the late action to start preserving and restoring these heritages in a more systematic way is still important in order to protect the remaining.

There are still a lot of difficulties these cities facing when restoring their past, below are some of the problems in common.
- Scarcity of land is a common problem in big cities especially in the already built-up areas where heritage buildings have already rooted.
- After decades of recovery from wars or political instability and the rapid social development in the recent years, many of the old buildings are under complicated ownership, being mis-used, having a lot of improper alteration and poorly maintained.
- It is difficult to add in the required infrastructure support such as access roadway or sewage system in the already congested areas full of historical buildings.
- It is difficult to resist market-driven forces to vacant land occupied by old buildings with very low commercial value and replace them with modern buildings purely for the sake of financial return.
- Making of law or statutory acts to protect private-owned heritage buildings are not easy for the going through of complicated legislative process as well as the involvement of conflicting interests among various parties in the society.
- Lack of experience from a strategic view in the restoration and further utilization of the heritage buildings either from the government or developers. An improperly developed project may undermine long term problems affecting the urban quality or generating other social disruptions.

CONCLUSION

The striking of a balance between the preservation of heritage assets and social development is very difficult in particular in cities trying to take off from the shabby past. The stepping into a seemingly prosperous future after years of fight against hardship is a rare opportunity for many cities in Asia. Some cities have done a good job and set a sample to other when facing similar development stages. However, every city is unique and a good example is just an example. Each has yet to find her own way. Besides good example, there are also very poor cases in which almost all the past history of the city has been erased, leaving tall buildings with international look showing only the wealth that the city has acquired. The learning process to build up the awareness of preserving the uniqueness of the past, or even how to appreciate these heritages, is a long and winding road. It is equally difficult to make it affordable in many developing countries. We are in the process of witnessing the transition of many of these cities in Asia.

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