Post-Orientalism in Chinese Modern Architecture: The case of Architect Li Xiao Dong

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ABSTRACT. *In the background of post-orientalism, this paper attempts to discuss the influential cultural phenomenon in art-related fields focusing on Chinese modern architecture. The aim of this paper is to come up with some universal laws why post-orientalism happened in Chinese architecture. Chinese architect Li Xiao Dong is considered as an example for further analysis.*

KEYWORDS: *Post-orientalism, Li Xiao Dong, Chinese modern architecture*

1. Introduction

1.1 What is orientalism

Driven by the expansion of Western colonialism in the eighteenth century, Western colonial countries began to explore the eastern countries culturally, such as China, from the Western perspective, out of the need for the language of the colonized countries. The so-called Orientalism school later extended to the exploration and interpretation of a large number of art and culture-related fields.

Orientalism has, according to the Oxford English Dictionary [1], been the term used for the subject and the works of the orientalist, scholars versed in the cultures, histories, languages, and societies of Asia or the Orient, since the 18th century when the tradition was born. According to the Orientalism [2], Edward W. Said, the author discusses Orientalism, defined as the West's patronizing representations of "The East"—the societies and peoples who inhabit the places of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. Orientalism is inextricably tied to the imperialist societies who produced it, which makes much Orientalist work inherently political and servile to power. Edward W. Said emphasizes the Orientalism as a right tool of knowledge and colonial ideology dialogues among cultural hegemonies. Firstly, Orientalism refers to a way of thinking, one based on "the Orient" (Oriental) and "the Occident's (Western) binary opposition is based on the Eastern way of thinking, and is used to "construct theories, poems, novels, social analysis and theories related to the people, customs, minds and destinies of the East and the East." The starting point of political theory" Secondly, Orientalism "is regarded as a standardized (or Orientalized) way of writing, imagining, and research, subject to various requirements, perspectives, and ideological biases applicable to the East. Orientalism is taught, studied, managed, and judged in some specific ways."

Orientalism has the power discourse nature of the Foucault sense, that is, in the self and the other, the East-West relationship is equivalent to The relationship between "seeing" and "being seen" constitutes a process in which the East is transformed by the other - the status of the inferior cultural identity given to the West.

Figure. 1 The Turkish Bath Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres

1.2 Post-orientalism in China

As a discipline, from 1850 to 1945, orientalism became a standardized knowledge field, entered the university, and established a systematic research discipline. In the 20th century, Oriental scholars also joined the study of oriental cultural identity. Orientalism became a discussion between the West and the East. In the international arena, there are still cultural differences in cultural identity.

There are two completely different cultural perspectives and cultural identities between orientalism and post-orientalism. The former is the post-colonial (colonial) vision of the West's inequality in oriental culture. The latter uses the "post" discourse to dispel and subvert the "culturalism" of the Western "Orientalism" that overlooks the East. In the cultural self-esteem and equal dialogue of Post Orientalism, the right Eastern cultural identity and Chinese culture are regained confidence!

As the economy been more affluent, cultural identity exploration is not as persuasive as GDP growth. Practitioners in most fields are still unable to get rid of the background of Western culture to think about China's regional products, and more to think from the perspective and standard of others. This post-Oriental cultural disease also breeds under the conditions of the mass aesthetics and obscures people's perception of true Eastern culture. The fashion industry is based on the best-selling Western products, and named as "Wu Dao", which has a great oriental charm. It can be called Chinese design ; The pop music industry is desperately attached to combining Chinese elements with Western mainstream electronic music and rap ; Architect Wright's prairie house has become a "new Chinese" advocated by Chinese real estate developers; For the artist, they gained the recognition of mainstream culture and commerce in the west through the political theme and the Western form, but what is the art behind the political background (western standard)? What happened to Chinese art (Chinese modernity) [3] ?
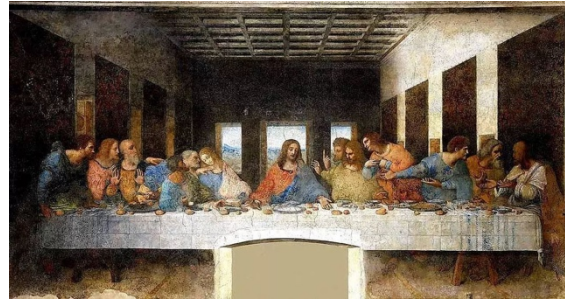

Figure. 2 Zeng Fan Zhi, The last Supper, China, 2001

Figure. 3 The Turkish Bath Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres

2. Post-Orientalism Architect

After describing the generalization of Orientalism, this article will further discuss the influence of post-Orientalism on contemporary Chinese architecture. Li Xiao Dong will be used as a case to draw the general law of the existence of this cultural phenomenon.

As a doctor and educator who has been immersed in Western culture for ages, Li Xiao Dong also tried to break the established spatial pattern of the "center-edge" of the architectural world under the influence of Orientalism exploring the oriental architectural theory on the same platform with the west. The theory and practice are unified. It also forms several characteristics of personal architectural ideas and practices. However, in most theoretical theories, Li Xiao Dong still cannot avoid facing Chinese traditional culture from the perspective of orientalism. It is to interpret and integrated with Western architectural theories and aesthetics with a perspective of seeking common ground.

2.1 Reflective Regionalism

Throughout Li's educational background, we couldn't deny the vital influence of his doctoral tutor Alexander Tzonis [4] in his architectural career who is well-known for his idea of critical regionalism. Li participated in Design Knowledge Systems (D.K.S.) [5] which is a multidisciplinary group of researchers, led by Prof. Alexander Tzonis whose objective is to improve design methods and theory through joint investigations in design cognition and computation. His study compares an archaic with a contemporary case; a traditional Chinese theory of architecture from a 15th-century text, Xian Puo Ji, and the theories of Kevin Lynch. The cases are compared in terms of the systems of graphic spatial representations and categories they employ and their respective value structures. Out of this comparison, the attempt is made to generate a more holistic, multi-view method for advising designers on problems of site organization and arrangement [6].

Li's research is summarized in the sub-hierarchy of cross-cultural studies on design methods in this system. It can be seen that Eastern culture is not treated as a background frame system independently, but a special design method in the context of universal. He was regarded as an expert in this field to try this kind of Chinese-Western comparison method, which also had a profound impact on the way of thinking of his own theoretical construction.
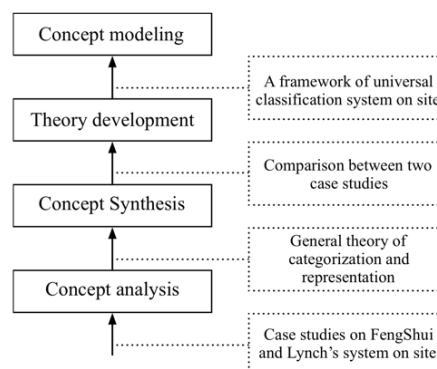

Figure. 4 Research strategies of "Meaning of the site"

2.2 Hybrid Theories

In his 2003 article "Bai Bi" aesthetics and Neo-modernism [7], he sought to deny the "national form and modernization" proposition and seek the commonality of the aesthetic characteristics of Chinese aesthetics and the development of Western architectural theories. The "Form" of architecture emphasized by Neo-modernism should stem from internal functions and external environment. That is to say, the quality of the interior space and materials of the building is more important than the added "Form". Reflected in aesthetics, Neo-modernism refuse deliberate, additional decoration, but does not negate the decoration, but advocates the beauty of the material itself. Then the paper ignored the non-minimalist aspects of the traditional Chinese architecture and the practice of modernism. It also laid the trend of modernism and so-called "Bai Bi" aesthetics for his later practice.

In the article "Reflexive Design" [8] in 2005, Li Xiao D reviewed the history of the failure of modernism, from the anti-history of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe to the typology of Rossi. He endorsed the criticism of Western architecture and believed that the critical history should be used as a guide when China faces the issues of post-colonialism, in which the article introduced concepts such as "Populism", "Reflexive modernization" and "Collective reflexivity", supporting "open culture" and "diverse theory" and "modern culture" in modern Chinese architectural practice. In other words, it should be a cross-critic relationship between Chinese and Western architectural theories. Personally, negation and re-construction are also part of the critique, and the reference object of the critical history for Western architectural theory is the history itself.

The book "Chinese Space" [9] has basically completed the establishment of Li Xiao Dong's personal theory construction and design methods. Orientalism's way of thinking is like a filter, which screens the value of Chinese architecture, trying to keep the differences with the Western mainstream values and remove the differences and translate them. The book combines the concepts of various Chinese and Western architectural concepts such as "Place and Boundary", "Fantasy and Realism" and "Artistic conception and Form" which define the concepts and problems that guide his theory and practice. However, this is an avoiding of the problem, and the book gives up a large number of formal contents of Chinese architecture. The discussion of formal resources abstractly emphasizes the interest of the ancient literati in the spatial direction and exaggerates it. What presented in the practices is "Universal Modernism" plus "Artistic conception", which leads to international recognition with few practices due to the readability for western scholars.

Figure. 5 Li Xiao Dong, LiYuan Library, Bei Jing, 2011

Figure. 6 Le Corbusier, National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, 1960s

3. Identity Seeking

In some articles of social media, Li Xiao Dong's life before 40 years old is described as two Chinese classics, The Journey to the West and The Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Life looks like an attempt to seek the truth in Dutch and settle down in Singapore. Cultural nostalgia is the starting point for his architectural creation in China. His trajectory after the age of 40 can also be described by two famous works. "Water Margin" and "Dream of Red Mansions" - through unconventional construction, break institutional restraints and build a personalized "real fantasy". It is undeniable that any person trying to promote traditional culture is worthy of encouragement

in the context of social media and post-colonial issues, including Li Xiao Dong. But also because of this background, it also makes regionalism a label for consumption and vague concepts for the public. This section attempts to explore the possible way of similar identity exploration by comparing Li Xiao Dong, Wang Shu, and Li Xing Gang from the aspects of "Structure and Material" and "Spatial Constitution" respectively.
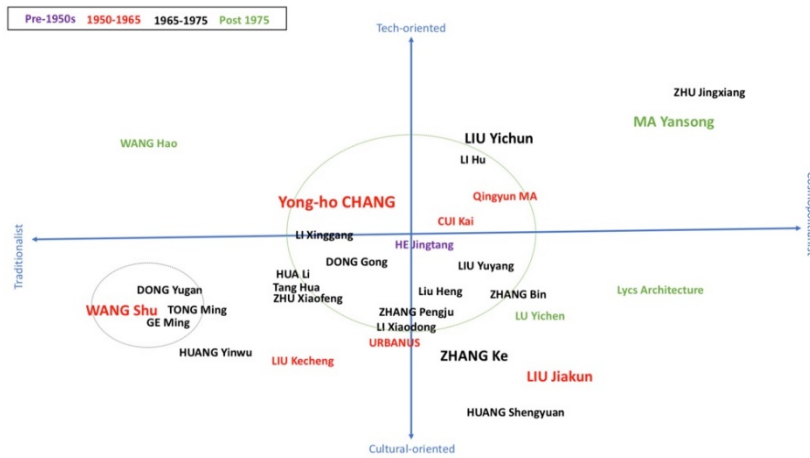

Figure. 7 Wang Kai, The new trends of contemporary architecture in china, between cultural traditions and technological innovation, 2018, Politecnico di Milano."

3.1 Spatial Constitution

"Scenery and Geometry" is the main architectural theory of li Xing Gang. Based on Chinese traditional ideas and philosophy of life, he tries to construct his own Chinese construction system. From the aesthetic interest of the ancients as the starting point, from "measurable" to "immeasurable", this is a poetic transformation of the descriptive space from thought to action. Architecture and the environment are seen as "artificial" and "non-artificial" interacting to further support the relationship between this person, artifacts and nature. He studied a lot of traditional literature, urban, garden settlement ideas, and also focused on the regional solutions to today's urban problems. Theories such as "artificial nature" and "new module" [10] were used by him to practice and "traditional modernity". From the above theoretical comparison of Li Xiao Dong's spatial composition, Li Xing Gang's exploration of traditional culture is more diverse and in-depth, and in the practice of works (plans below), their works have the image of traditional architecture, and li Xiao Dong is more like the modernization of this traditional building than the modernization of traditional architecture. It uses modernism to interpret the courtyard of traditional architecture. It is a gesture to design its own aesthetic interest in "Bai Bi", while Li Xing Gang's works are like traditional Variants. Traditional values affect all aspects of spatial composition, rather than the quantification of pure human activity scales, although the works are not as pure as Li Xiao Dong's, but more convincing. Personally, this kind of temptation and the attitude of facing the problem is the only way for Chinese contemporary architectural art to return to the "Bai Bi".
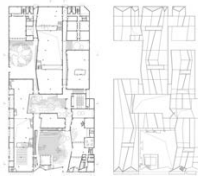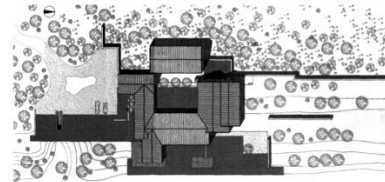

Figure. 8 Li Xing Gang, Ji Xi Museum   *Figure. 9 Li Xiao Dong, Water House*

3.2 Structure and Material

In the construction materials and structure experiment of Wang Shu [11], Building can be considered a symbolic system, Wang Shu abstracted the traditional architectural form symbols, and himself intervened in a literary perspective with traditional aesthetic principles, and finally presented in a specific abstraction. And a large number of tests on structural and building physical properties. In contrast, Li Xiao Dong's work is

interested in the application of traditional materials in structure, and more is to use some traditional materials as a decorative material to set the atmosphere.

Therefore, it is reasonable that Wang Shu said that he spent seven or eight years and lost his way and forget what he had studied for twelve years. How does architecture not lose its own, how architecture recognizes its natural mission of contemporary experimental art and rebuilding a contemporary Chinese native architecture [12] is a top priority. Individuals or communities without cultural self- confidence will not be original. In the face of post-Orientalism, there are two giants, and we have to choose to stand on the shoulders of the Chinese national culture with sufficient confidence to continue experimenting and creating.

Figure. 10 Fo Guang Temple, Shanxi China, Tang dynasty (857 AD)   *Figure. 11 Amateur architecture studio, Wa Shan, Hangzhou Zhejiang, 2013*   *Figure. 12 Li Xiao Dong, Water House, 2009 (from left to right)*

4. Conclusion

To sum up, Li Xiao Dong is a typical post-Oriental architect. His education background leads him unwilling to give up Western standards and theories to measure the problem of "identity seeking", which can be seen from his theoretical construction and design practice. "analogy" and "contrast" was utilized by him to explain his own theory and design, which undoubtedly runs counter to his goal of eliminating "center-edge". From the 1950s to 1975, the four generations of contemporary Chinese architects presented that whether it is technology-oriented, cultural-oriented, traditionalist or, cosmopolitanist, there are architects who are devoted to finding "identity" in their fields. Although every architect and artist who fights against post-Orientalism is worthy of encouragement and respect, regaining cultural confidence may be the first step in finding "identity".

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