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Changes of Kunming City in Southwest China – Translation and transcription

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Introduction

Many researchers argue that global consumer culture consumes signs and symbols as well as products and services (Lash and Urry 1994). Others, however, don't think that there is one global mass culture. Different authors have suggested diversity can be seen as outcome of globalization (Bannerjee and Linstead 2001; Robertson 1992). Howes, for example, use the word 'creolization' to describe the processes of 'recontextualization whereby foreign goods are assigned meanings and uses by the culture of reception' (King 2004:36, citing Howes 1996:5). Using examples of residential buildings in Kunming city in Southwest China, I will argue that recontextualization and hybridization happen in two different ways through translation and transcription. Some foreign architectural signs and symbols are interpreted and then restated with signs and symbols in the local language, whereas others are mixing within the local urban fabric without interpretation. Very often those transcribed signs and symbols are used as imported brand images. They therefore are not subject to altering or nativizing.

Many researchers recognize that 'the emergence of a global consumer culture is a homogenizing trend it simultaneously acknowledges and exploits distinct market niches based on culture difference' (King 2004:36, citing Bannerjee and Linstead 2001). I will argue that local markets also exploits and seek various ways of incorporating different cultural concepts and meanings through the process of 'translation' and 'transcription' based on their distinct cultural and social environments.

In Saussy's paper about the media creoles and the invention of the Chinese words for the telephone in the early 20th century, he argues that both translation and transcription are crucial to modernity (Saussy 2008). Saussy suggests that there are means of linguistic and cultural interchange that do not amount to translating, and call this complementary dynamic transcription (ibid.).

One of the English examples for transcription is a borrowed word: Sharawaggi. The word Sharawaggi that was much used in the Architecture Review towards the end of the war had first been translated from the Chinese in 1965 (Farmer 1999: 163-4). According to Farmer, the word had described the deliberate irregularities and contrasts of garden design first, and then was used to describe the pleasing effects to be had from exotic

juxtapositions of architectural styles and plant varieties in the eighteenth century. However, the word was thought to be too esoteric and scholarly for discussing widely the role of the picturesque in post-war building construction, and had been eventually replaced by other English words (ibid.).

According to Sussay, by creating a borrowed word, a loan word, we mark the foreign thing with a name that does not come from English, the language in which we are doing the explaining, but rather a name from Chinese was reproduced. In this way, we don't translate, but mimic (Sussay 2008). Sussay explains the difference between translation and transcription by using the loan word as:

“Loan words are an opposite of translation in the following sense: with translation, interpretation always precedes the restatement; but with loan words, incorporation occurs without interpretation. Translation works out what the meaning of the foreign text is, then elaborates a corresponding set of meanings that will suitably address the speakers of the target language” (Sussay 2008:4).

In the process of transformation of residency forms in China, there also exist similarly two kinds of processes of incorporating the external signs and symbols: firstly, transcription or importation represents something that has not originally existing in Chinese architectural tradition before; they were imported in their original foreign forms. On the other hand, translation or innovation expresses the meaning in Chinese architecture of something foreign, accepting the Chinese substitute of a foreign concept. These two processes not only reflected on the names of new building styles, but also reflected on the building forms. The discussion of these processes needs to be set into the context of the urban development in China as briefly discussed below:

Brief history of the development of residential compound in China

Courtyard dwellings have existed in China for more than 2000 years. After generations of evolution, this form has been developed into something with simple rules but greatest flexibility that can accommodate various environmental and cultural differences throughout the countries. This form can also meet demands from different building types such as dwelling, temple and palace. The traditional Chinese urban fabric was formed predominantly by those horizontally extended one to three story courtyard buildings and streets lay in east-west and south-north grid system between courtyard walls.

Around the 1930s, however, many multi-story buildings in Western style first appeared in Shanghai. In Kunming, Western style buildings such as Huize building of Yunnan University was built in 1924 (Fig. 1), designed by Zhang Banhan, a Chinese architect educated in France. At the time, those buildings were generally called Yan Lou (Buildings from the Western countries). As there was no corresponding Chinese style as those Western styles, Yan Lou was the new word invented to refer to those new buildings. The word did not interpret what the contents or contexts of those buildings in the Western countries could be; it referred to a whole imported package of the Western culture. What

those buildings implied in the context of Chinese cities was a historical period when China was opened up to the external impacts.



Fig. 1 Huize Building in Yunnan University, built in 1924.
Photo by Bluewan, copied from <http://www.flickr.com/photos/bluewan/2153949102/>

Different situation though happened to the word Garden. The space within the enclosed wall of the Chinese courtyard are normally full of plants and water features (Fig. 2). Especially in large mansions, traditional Chinese design of mountains, water, bridge and plants are very common. Those spaces are called Hua Yuan (A courtyard/compound with flowers). The inward looking Chinese Hua Yuan is different from the outward looking garden with trees and grass that surround the houses in the Western countries. However, it seems that the concept of English garden has been translated more directly with a Chinese substitute word Hua Yuan. One of the reasons could be that in both cases, garden refers to space that separate the private dwelling from the public area.



Fig. 2 A courtyard with flowers

in Kunming

The dramatic changes of the residency dwellings were in the state socialist era between the 1950s and the 1970s. Six to seven multi-story apartment houses was the predominant form for dwellings. In Kunming, as in other Chinese cities, multi-story apartment houses eventually replaced the courtyard houses for the urban population. Those apartments had bedrooms, living room, kitchen and bathrooms. They are called Danyuan Lou (Unit Buildings) (Fig. 3). Unit buildings were built within the boundary of work units. Work units took care of not only work but also family matters. In the work units, there were kindergarten, the schools, health clinics, restaurant etc. Those buildings and facilities are surrounded by walls and communal gardens. Work units own and manage their apartment units.



Fig. 3 A Danyuan Lou in Kunming

During the period from the 1950s to the 1970s, the China's state socialist focused on collectivization and nationalization. Within the work unit each apartment was identified by its row number and floor number. Those numbers implied more about the collectivization rather than the individualization. All the apartments looked similar from outside. Interior design of the apartments did not differ from each other either as the users did not own the property right. With limited funding, modern technology and materials, design of the buildings was aimed to meet basic daily functions. Any extra decoration and ornaments would be criticized as reflections of the corrupted Western capitalist sentiments.

After the 1980s, China's revolutionary era swiftly shifted to the reform era with a focus more on commercial activities and 'everyday life'. Changes on residency dwelling accelerated especially after 1984 when the Third Plenary Session of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee urged the country to move into a socialist planned commodity economy. Following the new regulations, housing can be exchanged as a commodity in the property market. The shift immediately led to the new forms of design

and construction methods. New form of property management companies also emerged (Rowe and Kuan 2002).

The urban development plan has put more focuses on the building of residential apartments. A new word, Xiaoqu (Small district), has been developed to refer to the basic spatial unit of the residential development after the 1980s. In many ways it resembles work unit residential compounds. It is a planned neighborhood where housing is integrated with communal facilities. But Xiaoqu is built and managed by a professional property management company rather than the work unit. Most Xiaoqu have barrier-walls or fence, and many have security guards monitoring entrance. Public amenities in each Xiaoqu, depends on the number of the inhabitants, may include core commercial, recreation and leisure facilities, middle school, restaurants, bars, banks, post office and so on. Other facilities level includes kindergartens, elementary schools, clinic, small retails, and community council. Recently, the word Xiaoqu has been replaced by another name Shequ (community district) to emphasis the function of the community within the residency compound, despite the planning and design of the residency compounds have no fundamental changes.

Ou Lu Feng in contemporary Kunming residential compounds

Situated in Southwest China, Yunnan province is the sixth largest of China's provinces. It shares borders in the south and west with Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, and has been known as the gateway from China to South Asia. Kunming is the provincial capital of Yunnan. It is a city with a long history of more than one thousand and two hundred years. As other Chinese cities, Kunming's urban fabric used to be predominantly consisted of two to three story courtyard houses (Fig. 4). Yet the city has changed dramatically since the 1980s.



Fig. 4 Traditional house in Kunming

In today's Kunming, the residential compounds are consisting of masses of 6 to 8 storey apartment complexes, some expensive 30 to 35 story apartment buildings (Fig. 5), and a rapidly diminishing 'traditional' courtyard houses. Along the main roads, attached to each lamp post and huge billboards are the colourful sign to advertise the new residential compounds. Many of those have fantasized names such as Norwegian Forest, Eden Garden, and Swan Lake etc. Inside those compounds one can often find large traditional

Chinese gardens with artificial water features, underground parking space and sports areas for kids and seniors. Most striking images in the compounds though are bell towers and arches in the Western style (Fig. 6). A special new Chinese name is created for those Western features, Ou Lu Feng (European Continental Style). The styles are mimics and repeats of Western classical architectural vocabulary. Within the wall enclosed compounds, Western bell towers and Greek classical columns stand next to the traditional Chinese garden mountain, plants and water features in contemporary residential compounds. Clear distinctions are deliberately set between them without mixing with each other, because they represent different things. Chinese garden and the consistent line of using wall enclosed compound throughout the transformation of the residency compound denote the paramount Chinese tradition that has been inherited in the design.



Fig. 5 High rise apartments in Kunming in 2009



Fig. 6 Bell tower in Western style within residency compound in Kunming

The Western architectural vocabulary, however, points to transnational global life. One of the promote article for a newly developed apartment property for aiming the mid-class on Kunming Evening Newspaper goes on about the dreamed life in this new development as:

“(The property is) Kunming’s ‘Paris’, ‘Manhattan’ and ‘Hong Kong’....The unique natural environment in Kunming will allow it to embrace the quality of life, and the modern life will blaze (people’s) sentiments in the globalized world. People who live in here will have more dreams and imaginations for your leisure entertainment, you can expect elegant dresses, luxury foods, coffee and wine, music of Jazz and piano...fashion is the only subject of daily life; with your career, you will be able to catch the opportunities of the urban development, access global resources, have conversations with business elites...this (property) is a platform that will turn your dreamed life and work into realitythe globalize of work and life, as those in Paris, Manhattan and Hong Kong, will sprout and grow around you.” (Wang 2009)

‘Global’ is now the buzz word. The city needs to be positioned internationally in a global network, which is increasingly important considering Kunming’s new role as a gateway from China to Southeast Asia. To connect to the global consumer culture is the norm. Rather than any particular place or particular culture in Europe Continent, Ou Lu Feng is referring to global images. It is a business package; denotes a brand name. It is a myth and a new utopia with its own magic and mysterious characters. It fills a need of desire, which is not material but psychological and ideological. The word and those architectural forms it refers to accommodate a fantasy which is impervious to reality, and is not to be interpreted into anything in reality.

Conclusion

Yan Lou (Building from the Western countries) and Ou Lu Feng (European Continental Styles) correspond to two different attitudes about the external influence. Yan Lou is the mimics, which represents something not in Chinese design before, asserts that there is no way to name the new thing without creating a Chinese new name for it. Ou Lu Feng however means that the western building styles are part of the styles that available in China’s design, and these styles only need to be adopted in the design, just like people choose cuisine from different countries. It is transcription rather than translation to foreign signs and symbols. It works as a complementary dynamic to the contemporary Chinese architectural design.

As Sussay suggested:

“transliteration or transcription operates as a complementary dynamic to translation....in expressing the genetic heritage of an individual, part of the information required is passed on by a process of translation, in which the markers are rendered by their opposite and parallel numbers, and part by a process of transcription, in which they simply repeat.” (Sussay 2008:5)

With the massive shift to the development of a free market in China, by repeating global styles within the Chinese context, the conscious construction of distinctive foreign forms, the local markets are exploiting and seeking various ways of incorporating different cultural concepts and meanings through the process of ‘translation’ and ‘transcription’ based on their distinct cultural and social environments.

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