

Architectural
Mimicry in
Contemporary
China

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BIANCA BOSKER



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With a Foreword by Jerome Silbergeld



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FOREWORD

Whatever one may have read about or expects to see in a visit to today's Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Xi'an, Chongqing, Chengdu, or half a dozen other Chinese metropolitan centers, the traveler there is likely to be dazzled by the pace of urban development, by the lightning-like speed of Westernization, by China's sudden surpassing of the cities of Europe and North America at their own "game." The New York or London or Tokyo that the traveler returns to can only seem like a dated and relatively downtrodden city. This phenomenon raises all sorts of questions about the new and the old in China, including the wholesale abandonment of China's two thousand-plus-year-old tradition of architectural engineering and urban design—a tradition so thoroughly systematized by the early centuries of the first millennium CE and so deeply integrated into Chinese systems of thought and culture that little room existed for improvement or individual architectural creativity and only slow, almost invisible evolution in basic form took place before the modern encounter with the West.

What isn't well known is the collateral Chinese tradition of thematic appropriation, dating back to the unification under the First Emperor in the late third century BCE. According to official Chinese histories, as Qin Shihuangdi successively conquered the last six kingdoms holding out against unification, he replicated each of their local palaces (probably in miniature, perhaps two-thirds scale) along the banks of the Wei River outside his own capital city of Xianyang. Before unification, when variations in regional culture were still considerable, in everything from writing script to architectural style, the diverse architecture arrayed along the Wei must have been quite a sight to residents of the capital and may well have rivaled the contrast between old and new seen in today's urban centers. The underlying nature of this appropriation was manifest as well in the early royal parks: exclusive preserves that later gave rise to China's private gardens but that were paradisaical microcosms stocked with all the beasts, horticultural varieties, and man-made replicas of geography from throughout the known world that the ruler could manage to gather in one place as both symbol of his hegemony and a reality that he could draw upon to enhance his own earthly powers. As a classic example of this, when still in the early planning stages of his invasion of the Dian Kingdom in the deep south (now Yunnan Province), the Han emperor Wudi (reigned 141–87 BCE) made a small-scale replica of Dian's Kunming Lake, upon which his naval

assault would be launched. Down through the ages, such appropriation continued. Reduction of scale of alien landscapes and architecture facilitated control; possession of the replica made it real. The modern historian of architecture should realize that the appropriation of Soviet-style architecture in the 1950s—no less a transformation than the current one—served in the Chinese mind to vault China into leadership of the international socialist movement.

The Chinese appropriation of “other” types of architecture results from all kinds of negotiation. Professor Ning Qiang recently showed me photographs of the city hotel of Tumushuke (Tumxuk), a town just east of Kashgar in China’s westernmost, Islamic province, built in an eighteenth-century northern European style found anywhere from Hanover north to Sweden and Finland. When a major hotel was proposed in an Iranian style appropriate to the region and its ethnicity, Han members of the provincial administration blocked it; if there were to be a local Muslim uprising, they protested, rioters would naturally flock to such a site and fortify themselves there. The designer relented and produced a traditional Chinese-style building instead. But now the Muslim-Uyghur members of the administration protested against this as a violation of their territorial culture. In a third go-round, the politically savvy architect produced the northern European design. Everyone was happy with it: nothing was lost, something was gained.

More or less alike in principle, each example of architectural appropriation is different in its particulars. But none is more astonishing than the one presented here by Bianca Bosker. Designed for China’s newly risen upper-middle and upper classes, a new brand of suburb has recently sprung up surrounding many of the modernist cities, serving as gated communities that provide simulacra of foreign towns and cultures—not modernist but retrograde, like the Tudor-style Thames Town outside of Shanghai. Providing the benefits of a life abroad without one’s having to go abroad, these themed suburbs allow their residents to globalize while avoiding the challenge of foreign languages and cultures, while China avoids the brain-drain of its educated elite. “What distinguishes the Chinese simulacra cities from Disneyland, Renaissance Towns, Las Vegas, and other theme-park-like environments,” the author writes, “is that the suspension of disbelief is temporary in the latter and permanent in the former.”

If the theme-park atmosphere here seems *faux* and superficial, Ms. Bosker’s study of this urban phenomenon most decidedly is not. She explicates the motivation behind it and details the reality of it through careful architectural and anthropological investigation, in both image and word. In her own words:

What this exploration will reveal is that the factors impinging on the decision to simulate alien townscapes are not merely exogenous but lead deep into the cultural character of contemporary China: the rise of its newly minted middle and upper classes and their desire for branded

luxury consumer goods and, more important, symbols of self-cultivation; the flexing of the national soft-power muscle; a “yes-we-can” boosterism bloated on a decade of unprecedented economic growth and increasing prestige and power in the global arena; and a deeply rooted tradition of celebrating cultural achievements by constructing gigantic monuments.

Accordingly, she translates this architecture into a study that ranges widely from Chinese concepts of originality and copywork—in Chinese ontogeny, *everything* in the material realm is but a replica of its ur-concept, or *xiang*, residing outside of this realm; multiples, regardless of scale, are equals—to a characterization of what these suburbs say about the latest in taste, emergent class differentiation, business methods, and ecology in today’s China. Those viewers who would be astonished by the sight of these new towns (Thames Town here, Fontainebleau Villas there, Bauhaus architecture somewhere just up the freeway) will be even more astonished when they read what this book has to say about them, as Ms. Bosker opens the gates and takes us inside.

Jerome Silbergeld

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and Director, Tang Center for East Asian Art, Princeton University

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Those who claim writing is a solitary craft are stretching the truth. This book would not have been possible without the help of many individuals, to whom I am indebted for sharing their time, energy, advice, and expertise.

Boots on the ground are a must. In this regard, I am grateful to all those individuals who assisted my research efforts in China—among them architects, scholars, journalists, officials, developers, and homeowners. These people opened up their homes to me, welcomed me into their offices, offered their impressions, and shared their photographs. Two individuals in particular provided vital assistance that has been indispensable to this book's execution: Sophia Miao, who has given valuable consultation and research assistance throughout this project, and Haiyao Zheng, a source of enlightened guidance, moral support, and lively company.

I am especially grateful to Professor Jerome Silbergeld of Princeton University, whose wise counsel and engagement with the subject matter laid the foundations for an intellectual adventure that would not only span several years, but would also culminate in a more profound understanding of what it takes to bring a book such as this one to fruition. I am also deeply appreciative of the insights, academic excellence, and editorial rigor that have been generously offered by Professor Ronald Knapp, Professor Xing Ruan, and Patricia Crosby, each of whom demonstrated a deep interest in the topic and in the fine art of bookmaking. They have been dedicated, valuable, and thoughtful collaborators through the process of preparing and submitting this work. When inspiration was required, I was fortunate to have been able to call upon Professor Martin Kern, Christian Hubert, Roger Cohen, and John McPhee, who shared lessons from their craft and guidance on how to move forward.

I would like to acknowledge the enduring support I received from my friends and family: Dorka Bosker, Karen Brooks, Joey Foryste, Michael Goodall, Tak Inagaki, Bibi Lencek, Katrina Lencek-Inagaki, Misko Lencek-Inagaki, Nina and Rado Lencek, Ari Lovelace, Christine Miranda, Daphne Oz, Richard Pine, Tanya Supina, and Ali Sutherland-Brown, all of whom showed an indefatigable interest in China's remarkable simulacrascapes and my work. I am especially grateful to Matt Nguyen, whose patience knew no bounds, whose support has been unrivaled, and whose constructive criticism,

manuscript reviews, and encouragement helped take this work over the finish line. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my parents, Lena Lencek and Gideon Bosker, for showing me the way with their own works, encouraging me to take risks, and reminding me that the trajectory from facts to story is a long, lonesome—sometimes even tortuous—road, but a road worth taking nevertheless.

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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



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.

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



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