THE VALUE OF SHIKUMEN BUILDINGS AS ORIGIN OF THE COMMERCIAL RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS IN CHINA
A case study of Meihetang Shikumeng buildings in Hangzhou

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ABSTRACT
Famous for the protection and reuse of “Xintiandi” historical buildings in Shanghai, “Shikumen Building” is China’s earliest commercial residential buildings appeared in the early 20th century. Nowadays, we still could find a similar architectural relics in many coastal cities in China. With a very important historical value, this product is produced and developed in the process western culture and traditional culture collision and fusion. By taking Meihetang Shikumen historic buildings in Hangzhou as example, this paper analyses the historical value of the architectural style, resolves the question how this architectural style from the foreign culture integrate into Chinese cities’ own culture and experience, and explores the initial links between Chinese contemporary urban residential and commercial development with this architectural style.

Keywords: Shikumen Building, historic buildings, Historical value, Hangzhou
BACKGROUND

One of the state-level historical and cultural cities, Hangzhou, is an important modern city with two thousand years of history in eastern China. In some urban area of this city, besides ancient houses of civilian homes with white walls, black roof-tiles and dozens of modern high-rise buildings, you can also find some Shikumen houses. The Shikumen houses with both traditional Chinese architectural features and western architectural elements are the product of specific history. It is the China’s earliest commercial residential buildings. By taking Meihetang Shikumen historic buildings as example, this paper explores its historical background, formation, characteristics and its impact on the city.

1. THE PROCESS OF WESTERN FOREIGN CULTURE AND TRADITIONAL CULTURE COLLISION AND FUSION

Since 1840, the beginning of modern Chinese history, Chinese people began to contact with western culture and thought. As the combination of science and art, the performance of the society, Building became the best reflect of the social culture.

In the book “Modern Chinese Architectural History Research”, the author points out the two main orientation of architectural design at that time: one is the advocates of western architecture, the other is the exploration of nationality.

By the influence of the two orientation of architectural design, some buildings with both east and west characteristics had been gradually produced such as Shikumeng Buildings. Shikumeng Buildings is a kind of lower row type residence which is first appeared in Shanghai. It is a product of East-West cultural and technological exchanges, and is also an important part of the history of Chinese residential development.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF HANGZHOU MODERN DEVELOPMENT

Hangzhou belongs to the edge city in modern China, due to the specific conditions of history, geography and resources. Because the city had positioned as a business and tourism city, Hangzhou had been far behind Shanghai in the area of modern urban construction and the development of modern architecture, but it had been influenced by Shanghai a lot. With the development of Shikumen buildings in Shanghai, some Shikumeng buildings were appeared in many cities near Shanghai, Hangzhou included. The developers of the Shikumen buildings are mainly the businessmen in Jiangsu and Zhejiang, and considering the specific historical, geographical and cultural characteristics of the city, most of them set their house in the area near the West Lake.

Meihetang’s location 1949
（《杭州古旧地图集》）

The case in this paper is located at the Linanli in Hubin. It is a terrace type Shikumen building built in 1930s. In 2007, it has become the third group of the historical protection buildings in Hangzhou.
3. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MEIHETANG

The main characteristic of Shikumen buildings can be summed up as facing new groups, adopting new space combination, using new material and new style.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Chinese Traditional Buildings</strong></th>
<th><strong>Shikumeng Buildings</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>User</td>
<td>citizens</td>
<td>businessmen then citizens, commercial residential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>organisation with courtyard</td>
<td>town house with traditional yard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>main materials: bricks woods</td>
<td>bricks, woods and concrete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>traditional decoration style</td>
<td>both western and eastern decoration</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Different between Shikumen buildings and Chinese traditional buildings (by author)

The developers of the Shikumen buildings in Zhejiang are mainly the businessmen in Jiangsu and Zhejiang different from the Chinese traditional housing. The Meihatang’s owner, for example, was Linsunda at that time who was the Colonel in the KMT army.

In field of space organisation, Meihetang retained the basic framework of the guest room, bedroom, kitchen and yard on the central axis, meanwhile it also adopt the form of single-family attached homes.

In terms of materials used, bricks and woods are the main materials of the traditional house, while besides bricks and woods, in some later Shikumen buildings, concrete was used as the building materials, such as the Lvyangxincun in 1936. In this regard, Meihetang was not very typical.

At last, Meihetang not only retain the carved window lattice with traditional characteristics, but also in some important part of the building such as stone lintel including stone carving finches on both ends, fine brick carvings at door head including some of the moldings adopt some western building decoration.
4. MEIHETANG AND THE CITY

4.1. City Scape

The Chinese traditional buildings are mainly in the form of courtyard style and the cityscape is formed by time. While the Shikumen building mostly are structured and there are more human factors. We can clearly differ them from Meihetang with Hefangjie, a typical case of Chinese traditional buildings.

In the developmental progress of Hubin west lake district in Hangzhou, we can identify that from Qin dynasty to 1940’s, accompanied by the reduce of the traditional buildings, the amount of new buildings are increase meanwhile cityscape are more and more structured. This is also an indirect evidence of the influence of Shikumen buildings to cityscape.

Landscape of Hubin from Qin dynasty to 1940’s
（《杭州古旧地图集》）
4.2. Lifestyle

Within the Chinese traditional house, courtyard is always used as the living centre and the square surrounded by buildings is used as a public centre; while based on retaining the original courtyard, there is always garret and terrace in the roof space. Due to the house of determinant, the space between the ranks is often used as activity places. The new former space have brought a new lifestyle for the city.

Difference in space in Hubin  (by author)

Shikumeng lifestyle  (http://travel.taiwan.cn/list/201308/t20130826_4785520.htm)

5. CONCLUSION

Chinese modern architectural history is a history of collision and fusion of Chinese and western culture. It is also in this period, western ideas and culture began to spread throughout China. Just under such a background, Shikumen buildings as the main form of China’s first generation of commercial residential house appeared. Meihetang buildings in Hangzhou is just one case of the Shikumen buildings, but by studying comparatively, it showed us the era of city and the society at that time.

REFERENCES