



A corner at Royal Pavilion, Brighton, 2024

## Framing the Other: Cultural Simulation through Architectural Imitation

Growing up in China during the 2000s and 2010s, I witnessed the rapid proliferation of such Western-themed developments. Neighbourhoods, named like 'Paris Home,' 'Ideal Land of Provence,' or 'Venice Shore' etc, were designed to evoke vaguely European atmospheres. They always designed with pastel facades, faux plazas, and even miniature replicas of the Eiffel Tower or Big Ben. These developments were not attempts at cultural homage—they were selling a dream of modernity, wealth, and cosmopolitanism to an aspirational middle class. Meanwhile, in the UK, places like the Trafford Centre or Wing Yip supermarkets offer a mirrored fantasy: ornamental pagodas, temple-like gateways, and lotus-shaped décor stage an imagined Orient for Western consumption.

This project explores how architecture becomes a vehicle for exoticism on both China and England. The work critically engages with broader debates around authenticity and identity. These simulated landscapes do not strive for faithful reproduction. Instead, they are evidence for the global circulation of signs - how "Westernness" and "Chineseness" become simplified and commodified fantasy.

The Royal Pavilion in Brighton is a striking example of the Western fantasy projected onto the 'Orient'. Commissioned by King George IV in the early 19th century, the building's interiors were designed in the Chinoiserie style—a European fabrication of Chinese aesthetics. The stylised dragons, lacquered panels, imported figures from Canton, and bamboo motifs were not the result of genuine cultural understanding, but rather of imperial desire. This aligns with Edward Said's definition of Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." Said (1978, p. 3) argues that



China House, the headquarter of Wing Yip Oriental Grocer, Cricklewood, 2025

the Orient was never ‘a free subject of thought or action,’ but was instead produced and managed by European culture during the post-Enlightenment period –politically, ideologically, and imaginatively.

The Royal Pavilion, therefore, does not represent China itself, but a version of “China” constructed to serve British imperial fantasies. It embodies the Orientalist tendency to transform other cultures into decorative surfaces—signs stripped of context and repurposed to affirm Western authority, taste, and power.

In the 20th century, Chinese style architecture became increasingly visible in England, shaped by the legacy of postcolonialism and the built environment of diasporic communities. Chinese supermarkets such as Wing Yip, founded in 1970 by Woon Wing Yip, a Cantonese immigrant, stand as architectural markers of this legacy. With their ornate gates and rooflines inspired by traditional Chinese forms, these buildings create a visual contrast with the surrounding British-style structures. In addition, numerous Chinese takeaways and lavish restaurants emerged throughout the country, further contributing to the architectural presence of the Chinese diaspora. A notable example is the Feng Shang Princess, a floating restaurant moored on Regent’s Canal in London. Designed in the style of a traditional Chinese pagoda, its vibrant red exterior, upturned eaves, and ornamental lanterns evoke a stereotypical image of ‘Chineseness’. While visually striking, such representations often rely on simplified and romanticised motifs that risk reinforcing stereotypes. These designs often balance between expressing cultural identity and meeting local consumer expectations for exoticism.

In recent years, there has been a shift towards more authentic expressions of Chinese architecture in Britain. The Shaolin Temple in London, for instance, draws directly from the spatial language of Chinese Buddhist monastic design. This represents a move away from surface-level representations toward culturally grounded



Former Victoria Park in former British concession, Tianjin, 2024

architectural expressions that reflect lived experience and spiritual heritage. However, the persistence of orientalist stereotypes in the 21st century cannot be ignored. Commercial and leisure spaces such as Chessington World of Adventures feature Buddha statues placed beside water rides, with little consideration for cultural or religious sensitivity. While some progress has been made, the Orientalist portrayals of foreign culture in the built environment remain prevalent, often serving entertainment or commercial purposes rather than fostering genuine cross-cultural understanding.

Conversely, residential developments, theme parks and even educational institutions in China increasingly incorporate stylised European architecture after the economic reform. At SIAS University, for instance, a replica of Big Ben stands beside the 'Oxford Street', a fake red bus, forming part of a themed area known as 'London Street.' These architectural fragments are not attempts at reconstruction. Rather, they create a sense of 'Europeanness' based on recognisable symbols tailored for Chinese consumption. Such spaces are less about historical or architectural integrity than about the visual performance of 'sophistication' and status. The cultural references in these places are superficial and largely decorative: A faux church at the centre of neighbourhood or an ancient Roman style column may suggest Europe, but only visually; the context, material, and history are absent. These buildings offer not Europe, but a fantasy of Europe, simplified into an easily digestible visual shorthand.

Some western researchers view these replicas as instances of symbolic inversion, which Chinese replicas of Western cities are evidence of a post-colonial inversion: by building these spaces for themselves, the Chinese have reappropriated symbols of past domination. In her book *Original Copies: Architectural Mimicry in Contemporary China*, Bianca Bosker (2013, p.90) argues the architectures in western styles 'become to the Chinese something we can do, rather than something that is being done to us'. However, these developments are not merely symbolic acts of cultural pride but are primarily driven by commercial



Red telephone box in Thames Town, Shanghai, 2024

imperatives. Developers adopt Western styles because they sell. Beneath their market appeal lies a deeper ideological legacy: an internalised aesthetic hierarchy shaped by the cultural authority of the West. Through fieldworks and interviews with residents in these neighbourhood or students living in 'London Street', they frequently describe these spaces as "refined," "beautiful," or most tellingly, "Yangqi" (洋气)—a term denoting "Western flair" and implying not only foreignness but superiority. To be Yangqi is to be aspirational, to transcend the domestic and enter a sphere of globalised status.

This phenomenon cannot be disentangled from historical processes. In Chinese cities like Tianjin and Shanghai, colonial concessions introduced Western urban forms as symbols of foreign elite power. Victoria Park in Tianjin, established in 1887 during the British concession, exemplifies this spatial logic: a site of imperial leisure explicitly designed to exclude Chinese citizens. As Yichi Zhang (2023) observes, the park 'symbolizes the British spirit' and 'became firmly entrenched in the symbolic life of the concession'. While many colonial-era structures were dismantled during the mid-twentieth century, a revival of British architectural styles has emerged since the early 2000s as part of the area's redevelopment. Zhang notes that many of the buildings originally constructed during the concession period have been repainted and refurbished to produce picturesque façades. Meanwhile, the new constructions have also been introduced to appear 'more British-looking,' featuring grey or red brickwork and adorned with neo-Gothic elements. In 2005, the local government officially introduced the area as the 'British Cultural Landscape Block.' The motivation behind this redevelopment aims at developing Tianjin's tourism sector. In fact, the aestheticized façade successfully attracts tourists, injecting new life into this post-industrial city. Nowadays, the district is widely promoted as a destination for 'English style' photoshoots, drawing visitors eager to post their experiences on social medias. Ironically, the same architectural language once used to demarcate racial and political superiority has now been aestheticized and commodified by Chinese people. However, this aestheticization does not erase its symbolic power, but reveals what Chinese scholars have termed the 'cultural convergence crisis'—a condition in which urban landscapes lose their local specificity through the repeated reproduction of imported forms.

Through exemplifying the architectures in England and China, it could be argued that the underlying motivations emerge from distinct historical conditions while both the English and Chinese contexts feature built landscapes that aestheticize the foreign. In England, Chinese motifs were often employed to fulfil imperial fantasies or to visualise diasporic identity. In contrast, the reproduction of Western architectural forms in China signals a broader process of westernisation that extends beyond aesthetics after the economic reform. This phenomenon reflects not simply admiration or imitation, but the internalisation of cultural hierarchies shaped by Eurocentric definitions of modernity.

As postcolonial theorists have argued, the power of colonialism did not end with the withdrawal of



'Chinatown', Trafford Centre, 2024

imperial governance. Instead, it persists through cultural, ideological, and epistemological structures. In his later work *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said (1993, p.9) observes that

imperialism “lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices.”

These inherited frameworks continue to shape how modernity is imagined in postcolonial societies, aligning progress with Western aesthetics and ideologies. The persistence of Oriental motifs in British architecture and the widespread adoption of Western façades in Chinese cities both demonstrate how postcolonial power structures continue to shape spatial representation, reinforcing aesthetic hierarchies established through imperial history.

Following the postcolonial critique, a shift to Baudrillard's postmodern framework is crucial for understanding how these architectural expressions have moved beyond representation into the realm of simulation. As Baudrillard (1994, p.2) states, 'Simulation is no longer that of a territory... but the generation of models of a real without origin or reality.' Themed architectural spaces no longer imitate real places; instead, they produce versions of culture assembled from recognisable signs, detached from historical, social, or spatial context.

In Shanghai's Thames Town, cobblestone streets, red phone booths, and neo-Gothic churches construct a distilled fantasy of Britain. The site is not simply inhabited as a neighbourhood but staged as a backdrop for wedding photography, tourism, and lifestyle branding. It does not reflect British life, but an idealised version of “Britishness” shaped by mediated imagery. As visitors pose for photos in wedding gowns or business suits, the space becomes part of a curated identity on social medias, where aesthetic impact takes precedence over authenticity. In such settings, identity is not something lived, but something performed and shared.



Haiyue Shopping Centre, Shijiazhuang, 2024

By contrast, London's Chinatown, once a centre for immigrant communities, has also undergone transformation. While it remains a commercial and culinary hub, its architectural features, such as red lanterns, and pagoda-style rooftops, have been exaggerated to align with tourist expectations. The area now functions more as a themed environment than a living ethnic enclave. In both cases, the functional logic of the city is eclipsed by the symbolic economy of spectacle.

Themed shopping centres represent a further stage in the shift from cultural meaning to visual consumption. At Manchester's Trafford Centre, visitors encounter stone lions, temple-shaped restaurant façades, dragon-head signage, and even a replica Chinatown arch, which assembled to evoke an exoticized "Orient." In Shanghai's Venice Town shopping centre, gondolas glide through faux-European plazas, steered by staff in costume, offering not cultural immersion but a curated backdrop for consumption and differentiation in an increasingly competitive retail landscape. As Baudrillard (1994, p.12) notes, theme parks like

Disneyland are 'presented as imaginary to make us believe that the rest is real'. And it is 'no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle'.

Themed shopping spaces operate in much the same way: they exaggerate fantasy to stabilise the illusion of authenticity elsewhere. By staging visibly hyperreal versions of the Orient or Europe, they obscure the fact that much of the contemporary built environment is already shaped by simulation. These environments are primarily about the consumption of signs that evoke culture while remaining detached from it. In the 21st-century landscape, their persistence does not reflect cultural understanding, but a visual system where simulation replaces authenticity, and reduce complex histories into consumable spectacle.

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