Understanding and Assessing Modern Architectural Heritage: Value-Oriented Contextual Interpretation Based on Dalian (China) Case Study

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Abstract

Modern architectural heritage, built heritage of 19th and 20th centuries, gains interest both of international organizations and regional agencies of late years. To conserve the heritage of modern times and of the previous era are of equal importance. The different contexts and the resulting understandings of modernism form a diverse global landscape of modern architecture, as well as the significance with the derivative values of heritage today. This paper aims to explore what could the contextual interpretation contribute to the understanding and assessment of modern architectural heritage based on a case study of colonized modern Dalian (China). Firstly, it will establish a theoretical framework with knowledge of value and context to explain the logic of value-oriented contextual interpretation, as well as how to conduct the following case study. Then the paper will interpret the modern history of Dalian and the influences of architectural trends in terms of geoculture. Finally, it will reveal the findings from the previous interpretation that the urban modernity resulted from a carefully programmed colonization and the architectural culture was an alien to the eastern roots but a continuation of western traditions, and shed light on the contributions offered by contextual interpretation.

Keywords: Modern Architectural Heritage; Value; Contextual Interpretation; Dalian;

1. Introduction


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that the study, survey, and preservation of 20th century architectural heritage should be further strengthened. Modern architectural heritage, the built heritage of 19th and 20th centuries as UNESCO WHC defined, is receiving an increasing concern in recent years from not only international organizations but also local authorities. To conserve the heritage of modern times and of the previous era are of equal importance.

Modern Movement arose in the West and swept across the world irresistibly during the last century. Modern architecture largely constituted the contemporary world but performed quite differently from place to place. This diversity results from the context, which birthed the distinctive characters, significance and values of modern heritage buildings, sites and neighborhoods. Thus, the contextual interpretation is essential to the understanding and assessment of modern architectural heritage.

Previous researches have much contributed to this subject. In 2000, Getty Conservation Institution published a research report, *Values and Heritage Conservation*, presenting the results of transdisciplinary research on the subject of the values and benefits of cultural heritage conservation (Avrami et al, 2000). In 2003, UNESCO WHC published *World Heritage Paper 5: Identification and Documentation of Modern Heritage* to present a framework of conceptual thinking on the significance of Modern Heritage, its preservation and some of the pivotal issues concerning identification and valuation in different cultural contexts (Van Oers & Haraguchi, 2003). American scholar Randall Mason considered value-centered preservation placed high priority on cultural significance and how it changed and provided a framework for dealing holistically with particular heritage sites (Mason, 2006).

This paper is going to find out how the interpretation of historical context helps to understand the heritage as well as its value. Considering the abstractness of concepts and the specificity of realities, this paper will mainly use case study to demonstrate the relationship between contextual interpretation and heritage understanding. From the perspective of geopolitics and culture dissemination, it interprets the historical context of colonized modern Dalian (1898-1945) in terms of urban construction and contributory factors of architectural style so as to answer the basic questions of where the modern architectural heritage in Dalian derived from and how to identify them, which are helpful to the heritage understanding.

2. Value Theories in Conservation Profession

In the profession of heritage preservation and conservation, “value” has always been a debatable issue but a consensus as one of the core criteria for assessment of heritage in international and local literatures. A common knowledge on “value” derived from economics, which means a pricing of the attributes of goods and services in trading activities. Another understanding is in view of the relative relationship between subject and object. In other words, only when meeting needs of subject could object become valuable. These philosophical cognitions are applicable to the understanding of heritage value, both of cultural and natural, and of course of the architectural.

At mention of value theory on architectural heritage, Austria art-historian Alois Riegl, “the prophet of heritage conservation”, must be the person without overlooking. Riegl firstly put forward his famous doctrines of heritage value from the significance of monuments to human being at the beginning of 20th Century. He typed the monuments value with definitions and interpretations and built up a systematical theory, which opened a gate to the debate and confusion of historical conservation of 19th Century. His category of values, such as Historical Value, Art-value, and Use-value are still workable today, although the concept of monument has shrank within the range of an increasing generalization of heritage. The international charters, conventions, and documents provide some other understandings of heritage value based on the continuous thinking of what to protect. From “Athens Charter” (1931) to “UNESCO Convention” (1972), from “Burra Charter” (1979) to “Nara Document” (1994), more types of value and measures become acceptance with the enlargement of the
protected subjects, such as Outstanding Universal Value, Scientific Value, Social Value, Authenticity, Integrity, and Diversity. They have been commonly agreed-upon standards in the research and practice of heritage conservation all over the world.

Contemporary theory of conservation shows that “value”, equivalent to “usefulness” somehow, could swap the concept with “meaning”, which is identified more dependent on stakeholders (Viñas, 2012). This trend does not mean the classic doctrines no longer work as well. In contrast, it reminds us to notice the localized reality, as well as for whom and what it is preserved. From this point of view, rather than the heritage itself, the “value”-also called “meaning”-of heritage for different groups, is the ultimate target of conservation, which will determine the decisions in conservation. Meanwhile, the conservation turns into an approach to the preservation and enhancement of heritage value.

3. Contextual Interpretation to Heritage Assessment

The context of heritage building, site, and neighborhood refers to the background of society, economy, technology, culture and politics in a certain area or a wider range in cases. The context has strong influence on, or contributes to, the significance and distinctive character of heritage building, which create value and meaning to the related groups.

To modern heritage, its context means much. For it is not only the difference from context itself but also the different understand and interpretation of modernism based on varied context, who formed a diverse global landscape of modern architecture. As “Xi’an Declaration” (2013) clearly addressed, “Chinese modern architecture, as well as modern architecture in other region or in different cultural context is essential part to international modern heritage” and “positioning modern heritage in its context is indispensable in exploring and developing the knowledge of modern movement and modern heritage, as well as redefining their context-specific values.” (DOCOMOMO China, 2013) In line with this, understanding, documenting and interpreting the context is essential to the definition, identification and assessment of heritage buildings and sites, with no exception of modern heritage context.

The interpretation of heritage context could prove to be an approach to explain the formation of distinctive character and cultural significance thereof. Meanwhile, it provides a broader view to identify and assess the values of heritage with more involved groups to distinguish and share its meanings. From this point of view, the contextual interpretation and analysis ensure heritage understanding a comprehensive and objective evaluation, which would benefit the subsequent procedures in conservation project.

4. Colonized Modern Dalian as Case Study

Surrounded by seas in the east, south, and west, Dalian is located at the southern tip of Liaodong Peninsular in northeast China, which is of vital strategic importance. The modern construction of urban area began as a forced loan to Tsarist Russian at 1898. In most of the first half of 20th century, it was under Japanese colonial rule, which formed the urban prototype of today. Of course, the urban relics built under colonial domination become modern architectural heritage of today with obviously different features from that of most inland cities in China undergoing a different modernization. Similar to the situations in modern Taipei, Qingdao and Xiamen in China, the colonial context birthed the distinctive characteristics of heritage buildings and sites in Dalian, which turns out to be a representative case worthy of exploration. Aiming at a complete knowledge, this paper will interpret it in a manner of integrated narrative not itemized statements to demonstrate the influences provided by the interweaving aspects of heritage context of Dalian.

From the Opium War in 1840-42, the beginning of Chinese modern time, western powers began to occupy
some strategic cities and territories. In 1898, Tsarist Russian forcibly rented Dalian and its surrounding areas by two treaties from Ching government and grabbed the power to build Middle-east Railway and operate ports, which developed its expansion in Northeast Asia and achieved the goal of an ice-free harbor to the Pacific. The construction of new port, set as a free-trade port to the world, was the major project and initiated a commercial city around for the supporting services. Tsar Nicholas II named it “Dalny” which meant “Far” in Russian and wanted it to be a prosperous city like Chicago in North America of 19th century. They set out a layout with round squares as urban nodes and radial streets for connections, similar to baroque cities in Europe but quite different from Blagoveschchensk (1856), Khabarovsk (1858), and Vladivostok (1860) they previously established in the Far East exploitation. The first phase of port construction finished in 1902 and the construction of downtown area completed in 1903, by which a modern city initially came into being with a population of about sixty thousands and a territory of four square kilometers, in sharp contrast with the former undeveloped fishing villages with five thousands population before opening. The Russian urban program in Dalian ended in 1904 due to they lost the Russo-Japanese War. Although Tsarist Russia only built the city for no more than six years, the imprints they left was just like a seed with genes of city orientation, urban layout, and urban aesthetics.

The Japanese colonial government took over Dalian in 1905 and renamed the city of “Dairen” in Japanese as an advanced outpost to invade northeast China. Same with Tsarist Russia, they also thought highly of the urban port and continued to expand it to be the second largest port of China by 1919. In terms of urban construction, they inherited not only the urban planning but also the urban regulations from Russia at the beginning, owing to the lack of money and experience to rebuild a large modern city after war. Soon they took Dalian as a test field to realize their imagines on modern cities, such as city parks, landmarks, sanitation and electrical facilities. They also made expansion planning mainly towards the vacancy in the west in 1919 due to the over 100 thousands population, most of whom were immigrants from neighborhoods and native Japan. The Manchurian Incident in 1931 further confirmed their colonial policies of “Dairen Centrism” for its geographic, political, and economic importance. Regarding Dalian as their domestic city, Japanese colonial government carefully operated it on constructions and management with scientific ideas and advanced knowledge, which benefited Dalian an even better modernity compared to those in Japan at that time. By the time the Japanese was defeated in 1945, an almost complete structure of Dalian took shape with 700 thousands population and 45.7 square kilometers land use.

To some extent, the colonial construction and administration contributed to the urban modernization of Dalian. Specifically, modern Dalian was artificially erected on a “blank” without traditional fetters. In addition, all the concepts and techniques came from the advanced western theories at that time, which positioned Dalian at a high starting level. Besides, the booming economy enriched the city thanks to the convenient transportation hub. The single colonial power at a time assured a relatively peaceful environment without apparent social conflicts. All of the conditions made the transformation and modernization of Dalian in a short time come true.

Similar to each other, west powers would never or could never adopt the indigenous architectural vocabularies in building designs in their colonized land. So did the Tsarist Russia and Japan. Both of their colonial authorities preferred western classics and popular styles of that age to design public buildings as well as residences in the restricted settlements in Dalian, rather than a typical native language of architecture of their own. Thus, most of the modern architectural heritage in Dalian appeared a hybrid feature of western architecture instead of the Muscovite or oriental characters. In order to acquire a better understanding of this, the cultural trends of architecture occurred in Imperial Russia and Japan at that time need an interpretation.

The architecture of Imperial Russia was highly influenced by West Europe, such as France, in terms of Classicism mixed with baroque features as a national leading style since 18th century and Art Nouveau as a fashion in the late of 19th century. Obviously, their architects would no doubt adopt these styles, sometimes
with national traditions added, like onion dome, in the building designs in Far East areas, where they called the continued end of Europe. The situation in modern Japan was a little different. In the background of Meiji Restoration, Japanese architecture began positively to learn from the West from the late of 19th century, during which the Classical Revival dominated the architectural trends in Europe and America. Historicism style with a lightly inserted Art Nouveau proved to be a hit of architectural culture in Japan at that time. Before Modernism was widely accepted in 1930s, as a resistance to European styles or a self-evidence of traditions, Evolutionism came out but soon grew to an Imperial Crown style, a chauvinistic intimation, largely adopted in their colonial architecture. Under such a circumstance, colonies became the best experimental plots to present what “architects adventurers” had learned and the stages to manifest a power not weaker than the West as they imagined, for instance in Taipei, Dalian, Changchun, and Seoul.

To sum up, the contextual interpretation of modern heritage in Dalian gave answers to where the modernity came from and how to identify them in globalization. Although the answers may not be forthright but indeed essential to the next identifications and assessments, which require concrete analysis of concrete problems. On one hand, it reveals the origins of the modernity, an implantation of colonization without escape at the time, which triggered the modernization of Dalian. The process in a sense could be considered “efficient” because of the programmed implementation without resistance of the local traditions, even if it existed but was despised and demolished in few traces anyway. On the other hand, it sets up a genealogical network to trace relatives and distinguish what those features might be as well as how they evolved. The modern architecture in Dalian is the fruit of the western culture dissemination, showing the digested and reproduced concepts and styles of western architecture by the intermediaries. However, this does not prevent us to positon them in a global picture of architectural movements in modern times to get their identifications. Based on such an understanding, the distinctive characters and dualistic values of modern heritage buildings and sites in Dalian could be better explored and understood.

Fig.1. Historical map of Dalian in 1933.
5. Conclusion

The period from the establishment to the basic formation of modern Dalian is just the time when the society, economy, technology, culture, and politics were all going through a rapid change under the West influence in East Asia, realizing a diverse modernization. From the global perspective, no matter what the processes and outcomes are, continuous or discontinuous, complete or incomplete, pure or impure, it is surely an essential part of the magnificent landscape of modernism, which also may turn into the view of modern heritage evaluation in Dalian. The case study of modern Dalian, not only provided some knowledge on urban history, but also clearly demonstrated what we could gain from the historical context and how it would help to understand the heritage characters and assess their values. In this view, the contextual interpretation is much helpful to the heritage understanding, especially for the modern heritage in different contexts, born in a time of dramatic transformation and eventually rebuilding the world dramatically.

Once Jukka Jokilehto said that, “assessing the significance of something usually takes time. In the case of modern heritage, the distance is still short and judgement is difficult. Even though our surroundings largely result from the work of the Modern Movement, we have difficulty in assessing them, considering that we are really judging ourselves.” (Jokilehto, 2003) In the context of contemporary theory of conservation, it is much necessary to expand classic doctrines via entwined perspectives and innovative approaches, even more so for those “live heritage”-modern heritage. Value-oriented contextual interpretation could benefit heritage assessment a wider but highly targeted perspective and an elementary but much required knowledge, which will contribute to a meaning-assembled and profit-balanced conservation understanding. Further study should follow with the development of specific approaches.

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