

# Avant-Garde Architecture in the Rural Hinterlands of China

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**This paper scrutinizes the exchange of architectural ideas between the West and the hinterlands of southern China around the turn of the nineteenth century. It examines the porous and dynamic connections between people, places, and ideas, as manifested in the construction of residential and commercial spaces in rural landscapes. Drawing upon fieldwork including architectural survey, archival research, and interviews with local residents, this paper uses four examples from three provinces to illustrate the ways in which the global fluidity of architectural ideas were communicated, valued, and localized. A building might appear to be a traditional house, yet the spatial organization within the house is westernized; a building façade can feature certain Western architectural elements, yet is constructed using traditional Chinese materials and methods; a building can integrate two sets of architectural ideas with or without any clear spatial or programmatic transitions.**

**This paper argues that when facing the Western influence, people in the rural hinterlands of China had difference attitudes and understandings comparing to people in cities. Rural residents did not view such new ideas as exemplars of the canon or the classical, and thereby allowed Western-style buildings to dominate their vernacular landscape, as was the case of many Chinese coastal cities. Having various modes of exchange with the West, local craftsmen of the hinterlands selectively adopted certain aspects of Western architectural ideas and sensitively integrated them into their local building traditions. Meanwhile, the diverse local interpretations of these new ideas not only represent local sociocultural contexts, but also reveal the ways in which ideas were transmitted, deconstructed, and accepted. Moreover, this exchange of ideas between the global and the local challenges the existing categorical analysis of the interaction between the canon and the vernacular by seeking a new identity for the latter.**

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional Chinese architecture, according to Nancy Steinhardt, is “archetypical, but not chronotopic.” In this statement, she asserts that Chinese buildings, although constructed in different time periods, in different areas, and for different purposes, often still look alike and share many similar features. From the other perspective, Fu Xinian argues that the strict hierarchy in building design and management during imperial China restrained the

development of traditional Chinese architecture; in other words, the tight regulations resulted in a historical Chinese architecture. However, vernacular architecture in the rural hinterlands of China often challenged the authoritarian boundaries set up by the ruling class, as it was logistically challenging to govern such a vast territory via a centralized government. As a result, vernacular buildings, particularly in areas quite a distance from the capital, often displayed considerable diversity and creativity in both architectural design and the use of decorative elements.

When facing Western architectural ideas and design principles that gradually emerged in China around the turn of the nineteenth century, rural residents and vernacular builders in various Chinese hinterlands retained the same attitude they had with regard to traditional architectural regulations imposed by the imperial rulers. Rather than simply viewing these new ideas as exemplars of the canon or the classical, they selectively adopted aspects of Western architectural ideas, and, based on their understanding, sensitively integrated these ideas into local building traditions to fit their needs.

This paper scrutinizes the exchange of architectural ideas between the West and the hinterlands of southern China around the turn of the nineteenth century. It examines the porous and dynamic connections between people, places, and ideas, as manifested in the construction of residential and commercial spaces in rural landscapes. Drawing upon fieldwork, including architectural survey, archival research, and interviews with local residents, this paper uses four examples from three provinces to illustrate various ways in which the global fluidity of architectural ideas was communicated, valued, and localized. The first two examples are family hotels built between the 1930s and 1940s in Yanxia village, Zhejiang Province. The latter two examples are shophouses: the first constructed in 1860 and located in Hekou, Jiangxi Province, and the second built in the early twentieth century and situated in Chikan, Guangdong Province. Before examining these examples, this paper first provides a brief history of the emergence of Western architectural ideas in China in order to contextualize the following discussions.

## THE EMERGENCE OF WESTERN ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE IN CHINA

Western architectural ideas, including architectural styles, new materials, and innovative building technologies, were first introduced to China by missionaries around the turn of the seventeenth century. Among the early examples, the Church

of Sao Paulo, constructed in Macau between 1602 and 1637, is an exemplar of the early integration of Western styles and Chinese elements. Although built in the late Renaissance and early Baroque style by local workers, the surviving building façade shows rich oriental decorations, such as Chinese lions, chrysanthemums, and Chinese inscriptions. In 1842, China lost the Opium War to Britain and signed the Treaty of Nanjing, which resulted in the opening of five port cities to foreign trade. The concessions in these port cities, including Shanghai and Guangzhou, became the places where Western architectural ideas started to flourish. Up until the early twentieth century, Western-style buildings primarily existed in the concessions of these cities, and were largely designed by foreign architects.

A series of political and social changes in the early twentieth-century facilitated a broader influence of Western architectural ideas in China. First, after overthrowing the imperial ruling class in 1912, the establishment of the new nation – the Republic of China – demanded a new national identity through the construction of many large-scale architectural projects. Soon thereafter, the New Cultural Movement, which began in 1915, called for a rejection of traditional values and the selective adoption of Western ideals. Meanwhile, the first-generation Chinese architects, who received professional training in the West, began their professional practices back home. As a result, many buildings constructed in the early twentieth-century demonstrate various approaches to synthesizing Western architectural ideas and Chinese building tradition. The Mausoleum for Sun Yat Sen, constructed between 1925 and 1931, is a model of such integration. Lv Yanzhi, a young American-trained Chinese architect, defined the “classical Chinese style with distinctive and monumental features,” as requested by the committee, by integrating classical and abstracted Chinese architectural elements with Western design concepts, including building proportion and the quality of interior spaces.

### THE VERNACULAR RESPONSE TO FOREIGN IDEAS

In contrast with the educated interpretations and integrations of Western approaches in architecture, as designed by professionally trained foreign or Chinese architects in cities, the manifestations of foreign architectural ideas and novel building materials and technologies in the hinterlands of China came in various forms, many of which challenged the canon of Western architectural ideology. The following sections examine four examples that adopted the avant-garde ideas in various forms. A building might appear to be a traditional house, yet the spatial organization within the house is westernized; a building façade can feature certain Western architectural elements, yet is constructed using traditional Chinese materials and methods; a building can integrate two sets of architectural ideas with or without any clear spatial or programmatic transitions.

#### *Family Hotels in Yanxia*

Yanxia village, located in the center of Zhejiang Province, is situated within a small valley bounded by Fangyan Mountain to the west. In the 1850s, residents in Yanxia began to host pilgrims, who came from afar to worship the local deity enshrined at the top of Fangyan Mountain, during the pilgrimage season in early fall. After many decades of development, residents of Yanxia established booming family-hotel businesses, which in turn attracted more pilgrims, including financially established visitors from large coastal cities like Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Wenzhou. Meanwhile, heated competition amongst local hotel owners facilitated the development of considerable services. One such service consisted of Yanxia hotel owners or their employees visiting wealthy clients to personally escort them to their village. During such trips to coastal cities, local hotel owners must have witnessed buildings designed in Western styles, which were, at that time, preferred by wealthy merchants and others with similar financial and social status. In order to please existing wealthy clients and attract more guests with similar financial status, a few hotel owners introduced these avant-garde ideas back to their isolated village in the early twentieth-century, when they constructed various additions to their existing hotel complexes. This paper examines two such additions: the third addition of Chengrenchang Hotel (hereafter the Third Addition) and the fourth addition of Chengzhenxing Hotel (hereafter the Fourth Addition).

The Third Addition was built in the 1930s as a four-story building. In contrast to the earlier typical residential buildings in Yanxia, which were primarily three-sided courtyard houses, this addition revealed a clear influence of Western architectural ideas. As the first attempt to integrate Western building ideology with local building tradition, the new architectural ideas were not evident in construction methods, architectural details, or decorative motifs, but rather manifested through altering the relations and quality of architectural space. Although the upper two stories of the Third Addition were taken down in the 1950s when the family had to sell the material for money, the changes in spatial relations and quality are still evident through examining the two remaining lower levels (Figure 1).

The most apparent change was the form of the traditional courtyard house typology. Rather than an inward-facing courtyard house with an open courtyard defined by rooms on three or four sides, the Third Addition consisted of a freestanding building facing a courtyard delineated by walls. As a result, not only did the courtyard become a much more open space, but the building also included a formal façade facing both the courtyard and the pilgrim path to the east. At the ideological level, this building established an identity that could be seen well beyond property lines, which was very different from traditional Chinese courtyard houses that were enclosed from the outside.

In association with this well-pronounced building identity, the Third Addition faced the pilgrim path to the east, thereby abandoning the traditional south-facing orientation. This

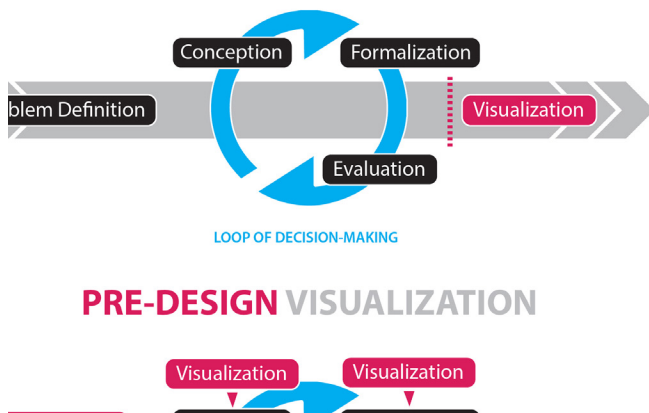


Figure 1. The longitudinal section of the third addition of Chengrenchang Hotel showing the spatial relationship between the courtyard, the second-level Main Hall, and the pilgrim path to the right. Drafted by Na Sun.

seemingly small shift actually represents a new architectural ideology: from environmentally centered design to human-experience-centered design. The new orientation turned to the view, in this case, the pilgrim path, a highly valued concept in Western building tradition. This new axis was marked by the entrance of the building and a symmetrical staircase behind it. It was further reinforced by the sunken courtyard, the east-facing rooms at each level, and the corridors at the higher levels, though only the corridor at the second level has survived over time.

Western architectural ideas are also apparent when examining the section of the building (Figure 1). The Main Hall, located on the second level of the house, incorporated the concept of *piano nobile*, as established in European residential buildings, yet in a hybrid variation infused with local tradition. With a sunken courtyard, the Main Hall was also at the street level, which was at the same level as the Main Halls in other houses of Yanxia. The concept of *piano nobile* was further promoted in the design of the railings, which became the most dominant elements of the façade facing the pilgrim path. Surviving railings at the second level of the Third Addition consist of twenty-nine highly decorative wood panels, each with a unique motif. This design innovation marked a significant departure from the existing local building tradition, which simply used plain solid wood panels for railings, as the second level was traditionally used for storage. This change was likely due to the influence of Western residential architecture at that time, which put living spaces at higher levels that were equipped with semi-private balconies with highly decorative elements. In the case of the Third Addition, the semi-private and semi-open balcony space created both a visual and spatial connection between pilgrims passing by and guests resting on the balcony, what was a considerable shift from the traditional inward-looking courtyard layout.

As the second example from Yanxia, the Fourth Addition demonstrates an almost opposite approach to appreciating and adopting Western architectural ideas. Designed and built in 1942 by the Hangzhou Construction Company, the Fourth Addition was originally a three-story building, yet only the lower two levels remain (Figure 2). It was originally designed to connect to an earlier addition of the same hotel, which was also influenced by Western architectural ideas, and formed an overall “L” shape in plan. Together, the Fourth Addition and the earlier addition frame a semi-public space *outside* these two structures. This spatial organization strategy stand in contrast to the traditional local practice of creating inward-facing spaces. In contrast to the vernacular context, this building clearly appears to be a Western-style building, as it is adorned with a central entrance in Baroque style and framed by two concrete columns and five arched exterior windows at each level. In addition to such architectural elements influenced by Western architectural ideas, the overall design and proportion of the façade also distinguishes this building from local courtyard houses, which usually have wall-style entrances framed by gable walls on both sides.

Despite its Western appearance, the Fourth Addition maintains many local building traditions beneath its non-traditional façade. The traditional building ideology is evident not only in the addition’s overall design, but also in its construction details. Although the main entrance faces the north and the open space shared with other building of the same hotel, the Fourth Addition is essentially a south-facing courtyard house with an enclosed courtyard on the south side. Like a traditional courtyard house, the building also has a central axis marked by the entrance hall and two staircases at the eastern and western ends. In addition, the building has a wood frame structure and a wood interior enclosure system adopting the similar module system as other wood frame buildings in the village. The exterior brick walls have the same function and appearance as brick walls in other traditional courtyard houses in the village: being

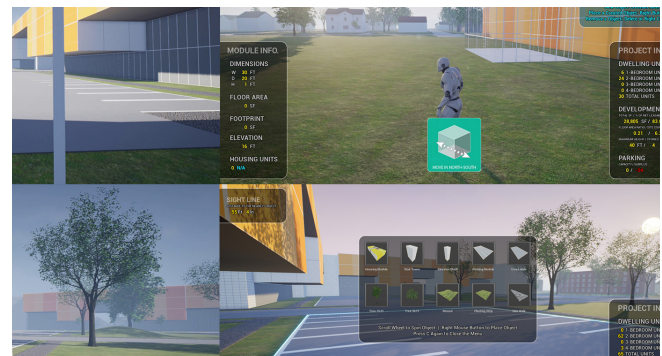


Figure 2. The facade of the fourth addition of Chengzhenxing Hotel exhibits a clear influence of Western architectural ideas. Drafted by Na Sun.

the enclosure system not the structural system, using the same kinds of bricks, and having the traditional box bond (*kongdou zhuanqiang*) as the pattern.

### **Shophouse in Hekou and Chikan**

The third and fourth examples are both shophouses in southern China. Shophouses emerged as a building typology in southern China during the Song Dynasty (960-1279), when the previously established urban planning regulation that separated residential and commercial districts began to dissolve, and commercial activities within cities began to flourish. During this time, traditional courtyard dwellings in trading cities evolved into multi-use buildings, or shophouses, with street-facing rooms housing businesses and rooms in the back serving as residential space. Shophouse, as a building typology, was later introduced to Southeast Asia by Chinese immigrants. Formalized and standardized in 1823 by colonial rulers in Singapore, a new form of shophouse – an integration of Chinese, Western, and local building traditions – sprang up in coastal regions of Guangdong Province in the early twentieth century, when Chinese immigrants brought this new building form back home after years of working overseas. Meanwhile, the previously mentioned blooming of Western architectural ideas in port cities after the 1840s also influenced shophouse design in other parts of China that were connected to port cities through trade.

### **Longwu**

The shophouse in Hekou, Jiangxi Province is the third example of the integration of Western architectural ideas in vernacular landscape. Hekou was once an impotent port connecting northern and southern China, particularly during the sea ban between the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, when Guangdong was the only legitimate port. As an important trading center along this commercial route, Hekou had many shophouses situated along the riverbank and the main street, all of which featured narrow storefronts and many of which stretched over 50 to 60 meters in

depth. This unique building type was known as *longwu*, wherein *long* means a long alley, and *wu* means house.

The façades of many of these shophouses show clear influence of Western architectural ideas, though the spaces behind may tell different stories. The building being surveyed was once a gas store, built in 1860. While the storefront spread about five and half meters in width, the building stretched over 50 meters in depth. Only the first 32 meters were surveyed, as the remainder of the building – constructed following the same modular system – was blocked off, due to changing ownership.

In this building, the shop space – about seven meters deep – is located directly behind the Western façade (Figure 3). Inside the two-story shop, a two-story atrium creates a central focus, which is accentuated by the natural light filtered through the glass tiles in the roof over the atrium. At the other end of the shop space, a brick wall – the only interior brick wall – separates the shop from the residential space, a three-story building with lower floor to ceiling heights. The residential section of the building includes four identical sections in plan. Each section is laid out adopting the typical regional housing form: a three-sided courtyard house with a central sky-well. However, all the courtyards are rotated 90 degrees to face the eastern exterior wall, due to the building's limited width. Along the eastern wall, a long corridor on the first level connects all the residential spaces. Within each section of courtyard, the main hall is the living space facing the sky-well, and the side halls bedrooms.

Thus, this building was designed with two spatially, structurally, and programmatically independent sections, each of which represents a different set of architectural ideology. Western architectural ideas are manifested in the shop space, including using a Western-style façade and vertical spatial axis articulated by a two-story atrium space. Meanwhile, traditional building practices were adopted to organize the residential section of the building along a horizontal axis, which was reinforced by the long corridor on the first level, and the spatial rhythm created by four main halls and four sky-wells at each level. In addition, the

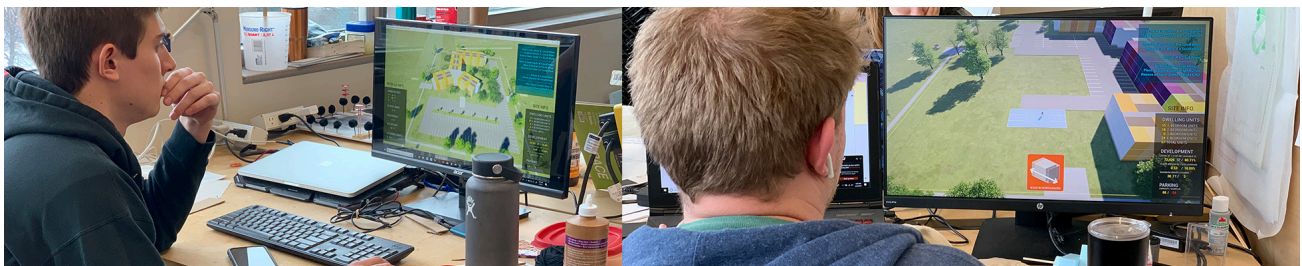


Figure 3. The partial second floor plan of a *longwu*, showing a spatial and structural separation between the shop and the residential space. Drafted by Aoilei Wu.



shop is oriented towards the street, or south, which orientation is reinforced by the orientation of the sloped roof that has the ridge parallel to the street. In comparison, the residential section of the building is oriented east. Nevertheless, the spatial separation is not absolute, since the space at second level of the shop does not have direct access from the main level of the shop, but only from the residential space at the second level. In other words, the space at the second level of the shop does not contribute to reinforcing the vertical spatial axis from the way the building is used, but serves only as a visual cue. Meanwhile, the only interior brick wall that separates the shop from the residential space also functions as a threshold connecting the two spaces at both levels.

### *Qilou*

The fourth example is the shophouse, or *qilou*, as referred by the locals, in Chikan, Guangdong Province. *Qilou* literally means the building that bridges over, and the “bridge” refers to the open arcade at the street level of the shophouse. Between 1912 and 1920, the city of Guangzhou promoted the construction of *qilou* with Western façades as a way to modernize the historic city. After witnessing Guangzhou’s success, Chiakn, an important port and trading town since the late seventeenth century, launched its own urban renewal project in 1926. In the following 20 years, over 600 *qilous*, having the same height (three- or four-story), width (about four meters), and uniformed arcades, were constructed along the new, widened roads in Chikan.

The influence of Western architectural ideas on these buildings is evident in four aspects. First, each of these buildings has a Western-inspired façade, though each design is unique, representing a local interpretation of a Western architectural style (Figure 4). The second influence is apparent in the adoption of new materials, including concrete, glass, and ceramic tiles. The walls are framed by reinforced concrete with brick infills, yet the pitched roof is supported by wood. Most of the floors are concrete, though a wood floor may be used at the mezzanine level. Concrete is usually used to construct the first few steps of the lower-level staircase, while wood is used to build the remaining steps and the staircases at the upper levels. In many buildings, imported colored or patterned glass is used to adorn windows and doors, and the floor is often paved with imported ceramic tiles.

The third influence can be seen at the urban scale. The arcades of these *qilous* are two-story tall, about six meters in height, while *qilou* in other regions of China or Southeast Asia usually only has one-story tall arcade. This enlarged scale not only makes the tall colonnade a more prominent element in the building’s façade, but, at the urban scale, it also turns the semi-public and semi-private space under the arcade into a more dominant spatial element. In contrast, traditional Chinese architecture usually isolates itself from the rest of the urban context by constructing periphery walls. In addition, the six-meter floor to ceiling

height enables the construction of a mezzanine within the entrance level.

Finally, Western architectural ideas are manifested in the way the interior spaces are organized. In the traditional shophouse – a single story building – the spatial hierarchy changes along the horizontal axis, from the shop, the living space, the bedrooms, to supporting spaces, such as the kitchen. Yet in these *qilous*, the spatial hierarchy from public to private becomes a three-dimensional construct. Along the horizontal axis, a *qilou* can be divided into two or three spatially connected sections. The first such section is the three-meter wide public space under the arcade. Next is the major building space, the depth of which varies depending on the size of the city block. The optional third section is a shared backyard, defined by the rear walls of adjacent *qilou*, which may also contain supporting spaces. More importantly, the *qilou* in Chikan also has a vertical axis (Figure 5). The lower level is the major shop space, while the mezzanine is used primarily as the office space in which to meet important clients. Although reminiscent of an attic space in a traditional shophouse, in this case, the mezzanine is no longer a storage space, but an important extension of the shop; it is spatially separated, while also connected with the rest of the shop via an open staircase. The upper level(s) consists of residential space, wherein movable wood partitions define smaller bedrooms at the front and the rear sides of the building, where there are windows, while the space in the middle becomes the family living space. The low partition walls also help keep the internal rooms lit and well ventilated. In some cases, glass tiles and clearstory windows are used to further improve the natural lighting of these spaces. On the top floor, a small outdoor terrace usually exists behind the tall, highly decorated, and freestanding gable, which becomes a private outdoor space for the family. Thus, the vertical axis of the *qilou* in Chikan represents the dominant spatial hierarchy, one similar to the spatial hierarchy of the traditional shophouse when turned vertically. The rotation of the traditional spatial axis is a manifestation of the influence of Western architectural ideology exhibited in buildings like Italian palazzos.

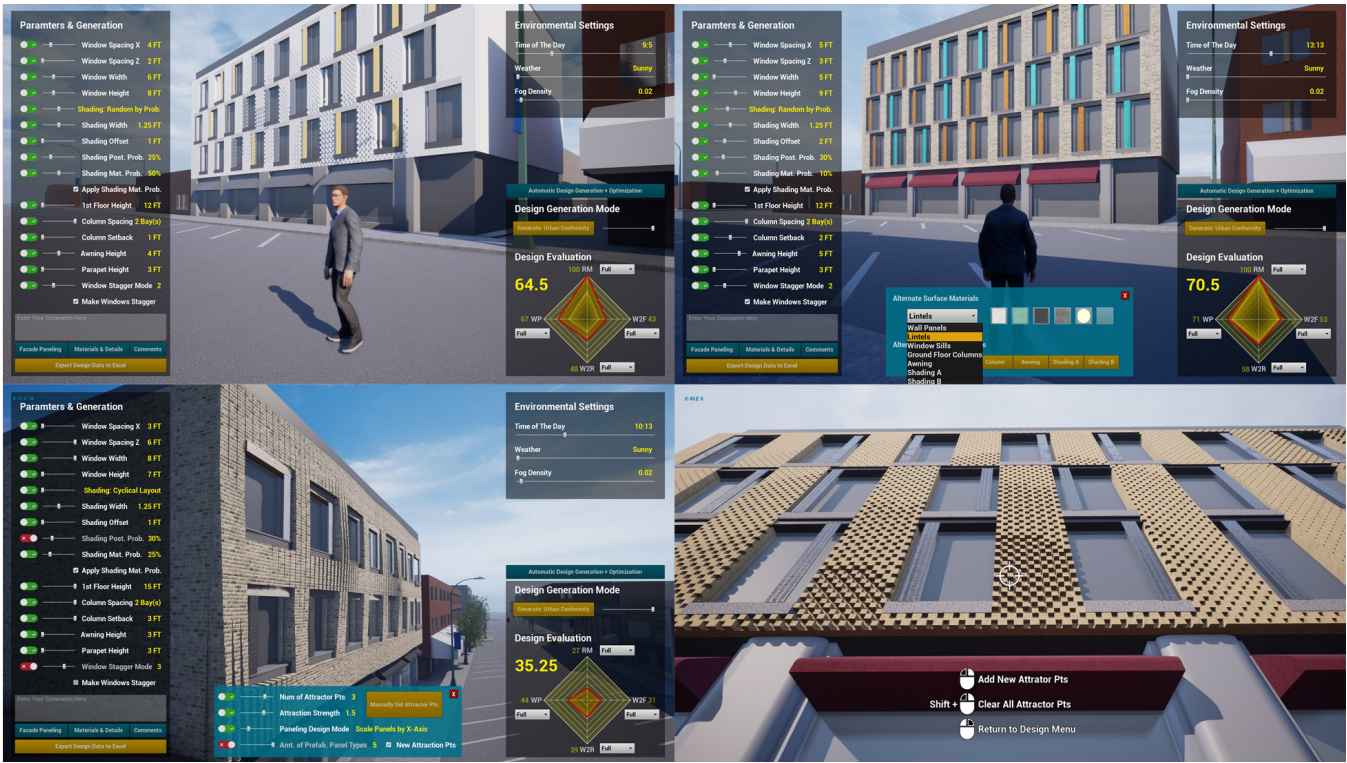


Figure 4. The façades of in Chikan, designed in various Western architectural styles. Photo by the Author.

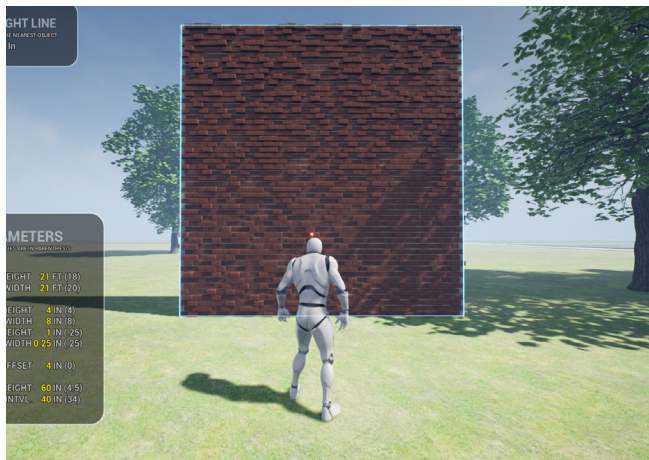


Figure 5. The section of a qilou in Chikan, showing its vertical spatial hierarchy. Drafted by Ao lei Wu.

## CONCLUSION

These four examples demonstrate that when facing Western architectural and ideological influences, people in the rural hinterlands of China had different attitudes and understandings comparing to people in cities. Rural residents did not view such new ideas as exemplars of the canon or the classical, and thereby allowed Western-style buildings to dominate their vernacular landscape, as was the case of many Chinese coastal cities. Having various modes of exchange with the West, local craftsmen of the hinterlands selectively adopted certain aspects of Western architectural ideas and sensitively integrated them into their local building traditions. Meanwhile, the diverse local interpretations of these new ideas not only represent local sociocultural contexts, but also reveal the ways in which ideas were transmitted, deconstructed, and accepted. Moreover, this exchange of ideas between the global and the local challenges the existing categorical analysis of the interaction between the canon and the vernacular by seeking a new identity for the latter.

## ENDNOTES

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