

# **Cultural Confluence: Localization of the Architectural Characteristics of Chinese Churches**

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## **Abstract**

Christianity, as a foreign religion, was introduced to China in the Tang Dynasty (6th Century). Both Catholic and Christian strived to integrate the Chinese architectural style into the Church design in the process of missionary, in order to accommodate to the local people. The thesis reviews the history of Confluence of Architectural Characteristics and Concepts in Chinese Churches. This article divides church fusion into three periods, and analyzes the reasons for the changes and their respective characteristics, such as plan, elevation, structure and decoration, providing reference for the style of church preservation and restoration.

## **Keywords**

Confluence, Chinese Church, Cultural Squatter, Combined Confucianism, Indigenization Movement

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## **1. Characteristics and Concepts of the Chinese Church: Three Periods of the Localization**

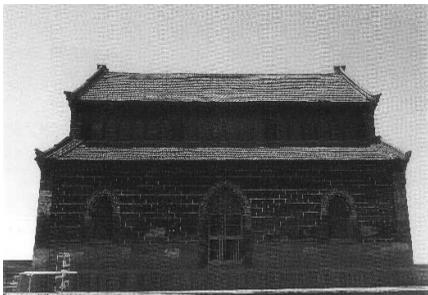
Christianity, as a foreign religion, was introduced to China in the Tang Dynasty (6th Century). Many exquisitely designed churches in China stand, combining Oriental and Western styles, in order to get along with the local people. They formed a unique church style. (Seah, 2017)

Generally speaking, the localization of churches in China went through three periods: Cultural Squatter (before 1900), when Christianity first entered China, it maintained a gentle and cautious attitude as a foreign religion. "Combined Confucianism" by the the Society of Jesus from 1900 to 1922, and "Indigenization Movement" by Protestantism and Catholicism in the early years of the Republic of China (After 1922). (Bays, 2012) In these three periods, the churches indicated obvious confluence in architectural characteristics and concepts.

The cultural conflict urged the Church to change the way of doing missionary work in China. A number of missionary principles were adopted, such as adaptation, fusion, and conciliation, making Christianity to spread widely in China. Christian "Chinese-style" architecture is a manifestation of this kind of missionary principles. (Austin, 2007) By confluence of architecture, the church is closer to the local people in physical feature, and finally convinces them spiritually with the spirit of Christ. (China Christian Council, 2017)

### 1.1 Cultural Squatter Period

Most churches built in China before 1900, except those in the treaty ports, were rather modest and created by the collaborative efforts of missionaries and Chinese converts. (Thomas Coomans, Xu Yitao 2017) The main part of church has obvious characteristics of traditional local dwellings, integrating Western Gothic and Renaissance elements in interior decoration, furniture, architectural layout and construction technology. Through the gentle and gradual integration, the churches built in this period were characterized by “vernacular”. (Table 1)

	Trinity Church	Zouping Church
Outlook		
(Local Dwellings)		
	Northern sichuan residential style	Shandong residential style

<p><b>Internal Structure and Decoration</b></p>		
	<p>Column and tie construction High worship space Western decoration</p>	<p>The spliced column construction High worship space Auxiliary space on both sides Western decoration</p>
<p><b>Details</b></p>		
	<p>Traditional Chinese roof construction</p>	<p>Traditional brick carving skills and patterns</p>

Table 1 Comparison of Trinity Church and Zouping Church

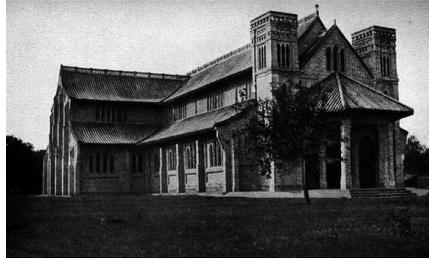
Typical representatives architecture of this stage are the Trinity Church in Langzhong (1895) and the Zouping Christian Church (1900). Both have obvious characteristics of local dwellings, but the heights of the church are increased by changes in the way of construction, giving the interior a higher space for worship. In terms of layout, they also incorporate western furniture and decoration. The layout of Trinity Church presents cruciform, which is more suitable for the space sequence of church worship, as the result of the fusion of Chinese and Western culture. The Zouping Christian Church has Gothic features in the form of entrance arches, window forms and interior worship spaces.

### 1.2 Combined Confucianism Period

As the conflict between the late Qing and the Western countries increased, the Taiping Rebellion and the Boxer Uprising represented the climax of the people's anti-colonial sentiment. Some of the indemnities in the Peace Protocol of 1901 were used to reconstruct the churches ruined by the Boxers. Western style represented by Gothic was considered as a "triumph" form and a symbol of the national identity of the Western countries. Western construction techniques were introduced to China, and a

series of Gothic churches appeared in the north, but Gothic churches found it difficult to adapt to local climate, while pure Western style had a certain distance from local people. Some churches began to explore new forms by combining Confucianism. Therefore, with Western Gothic and Baroque gables, the churches indicated Chinese architectural elements and traditional ornament as much as possible, such as building with brick and wood structure, couplets, and Chinese auspicious symbols. For instance, Evangel Church in Langzhong is of such style.

The transformation of the form of churches is intuitively reflected in the church built by the same missionary. The Evangel Church in Langzhong was the largest church in the southwestern region, built by Gaisley, the same as the Trinity Church, which is only 50 meters away. Although influenced by traditional Chinese architecture in the tile roof and the side gallery, the Evangel Church is a typical Gothic church on the façade and structure, which is completely different from the Trinity Church, a typical Chinese style church with some western decorations, built before 1900. (Table 2)

	Trinity Church	Evangel Church
Time	1898	1908
Old photo		
	Cross plan	
	Chinese form	Gothic ( with tile roof and eave roof )
structure		
	Column and tie construction	The spliced column and arch

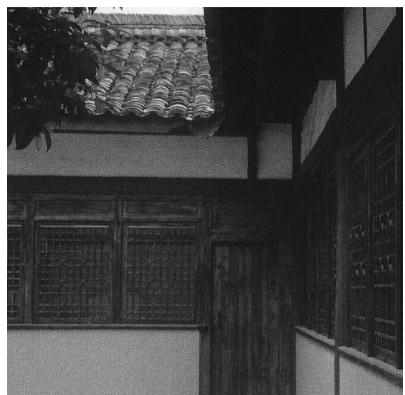
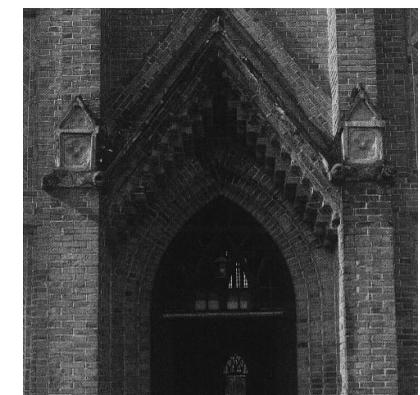
Main Entrance		
Entrance		

Table 2 Comparison of Trinity Church and Evangel Church in Langzhong

### 1.3 Indigenization Movement Period

In the period of "Indigenization Movement" by both Protestantism and Catholicism, new changes have taken place in the churches. After the Boxers Movement, the Chinese churches and clergies rethought about the architectural style. In 1922, Celso Costantini (1876-1958) came to China as the Apostolic Administrator. He believed that the use of complete Western style in China was a misunderstanding, which would emphasize that Christianity is an exotic religion. He advocated that, as long as the church embodied the spirit of love and humanity, it is not necessary to be subjected to a fixed style. Localized church created diversity. He put forward the concept of "inculturation" to root and integrate Christian faith with specific culture. (Costantini, 1968)

They hoped to remove the Western characteristics of Christianity and establish a Chinese governed church. The "Indigenization Movement" aimed to change negative impressions of the local people on the religion. In that case, churches no longer imitated gothic or other Western architectural styles. The function of worship was the key concept. The sacred sense of the architectural space was kept in these Chinese style churches. These churches used the prototype of palaces or bell towers, traditional facades, and structure flying over the roofs.

Due to the economic crisis and the subsequent wars, this process did not shed a wide

and far-reaching impact, but it still left some typical representatives of churches. For instance, Fitch Memorial Church designed by Yang Xiliu is a typical example of such style.

Fitch Memorial Church, also known as Shanghai Hongde Church, its design abandoned the classic western church architecture, and the top of the building adopted traditional Chinese corbel bracket system (Dou Gong) and pointed roof. The exterior of the church intimates the traditional royal palace. (Fig.1) The facade follows Chinese architectural style. At the entrance, there is a clock tower instead of the gable wall. The clock tower is in the middle, with a wood pointed roof and double hip roofs on each side. Supporting the roofs are red cement cylindrical columns, which imitate wood structure. The eaves have with colorful decorations, which are the symbolic elements in the Christian Church. The entire building looks like a Chinese temple. Without the Red Cross, it can be hardly recognized as a church from the exterior.



Fig.1 Shanghai Hongde Church, 1928, "Indigenization Movement" period (Source: Original rendering by the architect Yang Xiliu)

## **2. The Localized Characteristics of Chinese Churches**

Through case studies of 8 existing churches in the period of "Culture Squatter", 15 churches in the period of "Combined Confucianism" and 17 churches in the period of "Indigenization Movement", the thesis analyzes the characteristics of the churches combining the Oriental and Western style, such as plan, elevation, structure, and decoration. (Table 3) It is noticed that the three periods brought cultural and

architectural integration. However, the motives of the three movements are different. In the Culture Squatter period, due to the cautious attitude in the early days of religious communication, the church used the traditional Chinese style as much as possible, and only showed Western features in the details. In the Combined Confucianism period, the integration of architecture mainly aimed to eliminate the doubts of people towards foreign religions. To enable people understand the idea of the Bible, the church decorated Chinese symbolic patterns instead of the western ones. In the Combined Confucianism period, the crucial task is to protect churches from the hostility of Nationalism. Churches are designed to be more restrained than the former period and use more Chinese architectural elements. From the perspective of architectural history, these movements objectively promoted the development and localization of Christianity in China. And they created a unique architectural form. (Fig.2)

	8 Churches of the Combined Confucianism	15 Churches of the Combined Confucianism	17 Churches of the Indigenization Movement
<b>Plan</b>	6 (75%)	2 (13.3%)	8(47.1%)
<b>Elevation</b>	7 (87.5%)	13 (86.7%)	15(88.2%)
<b>Structure</b>	5(62.5%)	3 (20%)	13(76.5%)
<b>Decoration</b>	8 (100%)	13 (86.7%)	15(88.2%)

Table 3. Statistics of the Church's feature in Chinese Style (Source: the author)

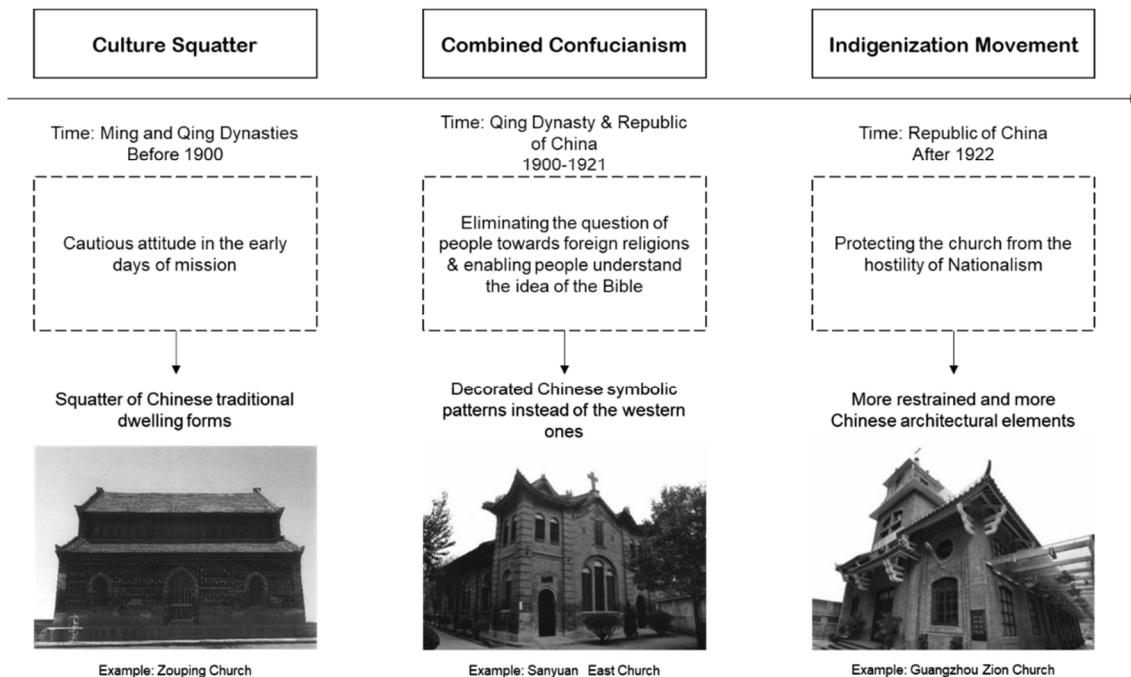


Fig.2 Confluence of the Chinese Church in the two periods

According to the table, the architectural styles of the three localization movements have similar appearance, but also with some differences. First, unlike the rectangular plan of traditional Chinese architecture, the Latin cross plan is still the majority, in order to hold a variety of services. Second, nearly half of the churches have localized facade, to keep close to the common people. (Austin, 2007) Third, with the development of materials, the structure and decoration, traditional Chinese architecture with the corbel bracket system has been altered. Concrete was introduced to China in late 19th century. Some churches are designed with the load-bearing wall system.

### 3. Categorization in Preservation and Restoration in Construction

This section analyzes the formal characteristics of three major periods of Chinese churches, summarizes the architectural characteristics of each stage, and solves the qualitative problem of the style of church preservation and restoration.

#### 3.1 Culture Squatter Style (before 1900)

Culture squatter churches are mainly of Chinese style and structure. Doors, windows and interior decoration are typical places with Western features, and the scale of churches are relatively small. (Fig.3) For instance, Changting Church uses the form of Fujian dwellings, brick and wood structure and column and tie frame. The church and two auxiliary rooms are enclosed to form a

courtyard. The entire church, with the exception of the interior decoration and the entrance arches, is similar to the distinctive traditional residences of southern Fujian.

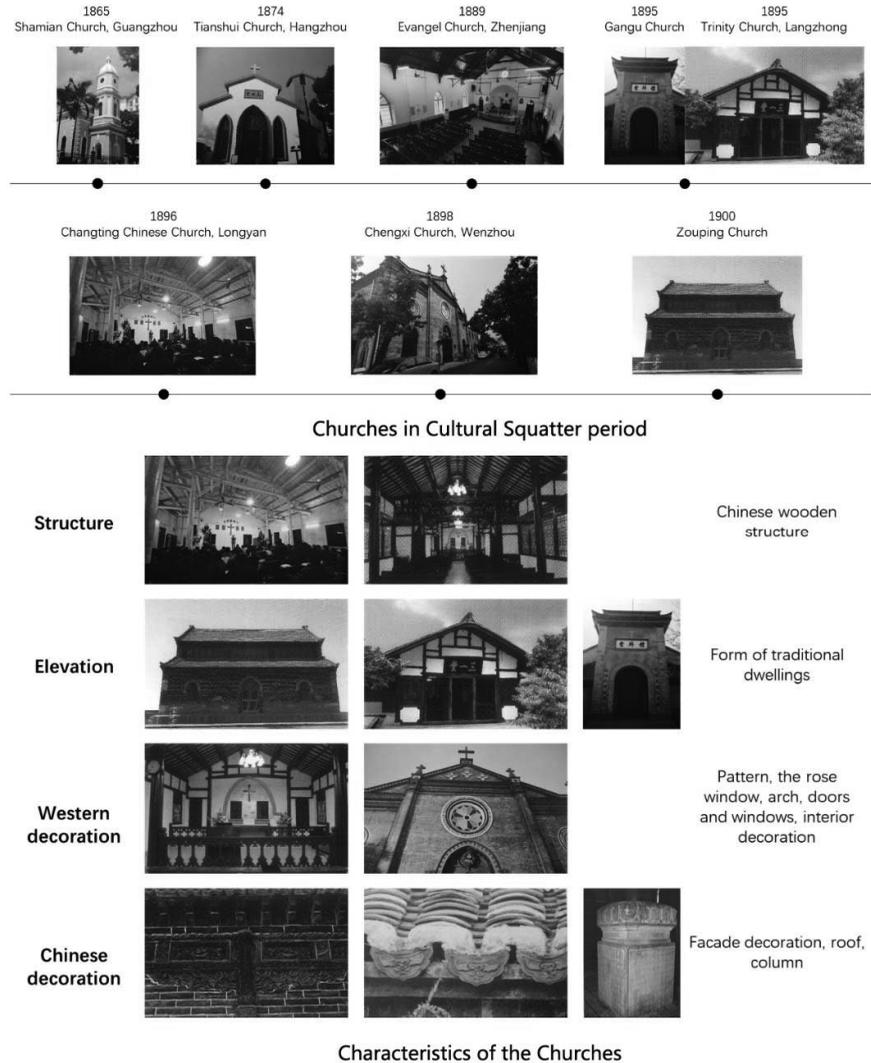
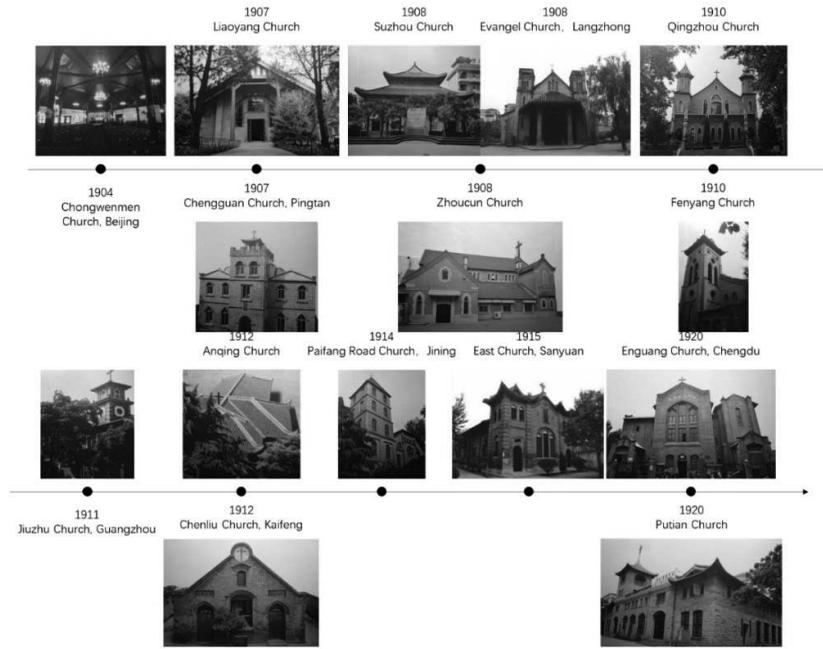


Fig.3 Churches and their Characteristics in the Culture Squatter period

### 3.2 Combined Confucianism (1900-1921)

The main body of the Combined Confucianism churches is in the form of Western style. The structure is mostly Gothic spliced columns or arch vouchers. The roofs mostly are Chinese tile roofs. In terms of decoration, Chinese elements began to be used to express western religious doctrines. (Fig.4) For example, the eaves tile pattern in the Suzhou Gospel Hall is changed from the traditional animal head to the Chinese character "愛" (love), and the horizontal column painted the Bible story, and the brick carved bible in East church in Sanyuan. In addition, the image of the church bell tower at this stage vividly reflects the fusion of Chinese and Western, or the Western-style bell tower is decorated with Chinese bucket arch (Jiuzhu Church in

Guangzhou) or sloping roof (Chengguan Church in Putian), or directly used Chinese tower construction (Fenyang Church, Suzhou Church).



Churches in Combined Confucianism period



Characteristics of the Churches

Fig.4 Churches and their Characteristics in the Combined Confucianism period

**3.3 Indigenization Movement (After 1922)**

The appearance of the churches has more obvious Chinese characteristic, the structure is mostly Western, the roofs are mostly truss structures and Chinese tile roofs, and the facades and roofs are less decorated. Western decoration is more delicate, while Chinese decoration is widely used in places such as ceilings, columns, beams, etc. In Evangel Church in Shouxian, Exodus scriptures are carved on the wooden beams, and the figures in them are all dressed in traditional Chinese costumes (different from the Western image in the painting of Suzhou Church). The traditional pomegranate, which

means "fruitful," has replaced the biblical equivalent of the grape in church decoration. Besides, some large double-storey churches appeared in this period. (Fig.5)



Churches in Indigenization Movement period

Structure					Chinese structure is increasingly used, even in large-span space.
Elevation					Chinese characteristics are obvious, Western characteristics are weakened
Decoration					Western decoration is more delicate, and Chinese decoration is widely used in places such as ceilings, columns, beams, etc. to tell doctrine.
Double-floor					more large-volume churches and more double-layer worship spaces

Characteristics of the Churches

Fig.5 Churches and their Characteristics in the Indigenization Movement period

#### 4. Conclusions

The thesis reviews the history of Confluence of Architectural Characteristics and Concepts in Chinese Churches. It analyzes the characteristics of the churches combining the Oriental and Western style, such as regulation, structure, elevation, decoration and landscape. All the three movements objectively promoted the development and localization of Christianity in China. And they created a unique architectural form. The thesis analyzes the formal characteristics of three major periods of Chinese churches, summarizes the architectural characteristics of each stage. It will help to cope with the issues of categorization in preservation and restoration in construction.

#### Notes

1. 盖士利, William Cassels, representative of China Inland Mission, graduated from Cambridge University, first bishop of the Anglican Church in Huaxi Diocese.

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