**The Commercial Street as 'Frozen' Festival: A Study in Chinese Mercantile Traditions**

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*Abstract:*

Situated amidst the contemporary skyscrapers of many Chinese cities today, commercial streets have emerged in traditional Chinese styles that serve as places to host festive celebrations and to satisfy everyday leisure and commercial needs. Buildings that are situated along these streets operate at one level as ritual ‘encasements’ that frame the festival processions, and thereby ‘speak’ of ceremonial meanings. As such, these framing devices constitute material remnants of past festival events periodically re-activated as public spectacles or during momentary episodes of individual/collective recollection. This study explores themes relating to these intersections between building and festive occasion through an examination of two traditionally designed commercial streets in China. The study argues that architecture in these two cases presents in different ways a ‘foregrounding’ of festivals, in which participants are reminded of previous events. Accordingly, architectural elements and their details serve as substitutes to words, in the way they re-capitulate the verbal and gestural meanings of festivals through design language.

***Keywords:*** traditional style commercial street, festival, architectural language, builders; design language

***Figure captions:***

**Figure 1**

**Winehouse and Restaurant by the Yi Water in the Water Street. Photography by Yan Li, 2017.**

**Figure 2**

**Traditional and modern style buildings on Old Street in Kunming. Photography by Yun Gao, 2013.**

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**Introduction**

The research explores the festive and symbolic meaning of ornamented facades in two cases of contemporary commercial streets that were built in traditional styles in the reform period after 1980s as special places to host festivals/special events for visitors to experience and understand local histories, as well as accommodate commercial interests and everyday leisure purposes. The first street was newly designed and constructed to consciously mimic a historic built environment in Jiangnan area in east China; the second is a renovation of a historic street in the borderlands of southwest China. Jiangnan area (which collectively refers to Jiangsu province, Zhujiang province and Shanghai) was historically famous for its bustling commercial activities that date back to the Song Dynasty (960-1279). At that time, many rich salt merchants in the region sponsored theatres in cities that attracted crowds of businessmen and other visitors from all over the country and promoted the commercial activities in urban spaces. As Meng describes, this daily ‘Urban festivity’ in Suzhou during the Song Dynasty constituted a culture whose energy was “generated by a concentration of such urban settings, filled with crowds of businessmen, travellers, theatregoers, sightseers, small shopkeepers, ‘country bumpkins’, rich ladies, prostitutes, and pickpockets”[[1]](#endnote-1).

The commercial activities in the Jiangnan area were well documented in famous historic paintings. Christian de Pee also discussed the artists’ representations of urban festivities in Suzhou, stating that the city was animated by the logic of livelihood within the cosmological cycle. It was the cosmological dimensions of ‘Urban Festivity’ that connected two different phenomena: material prosperity on the one hand and cosmopolitan human vitality on the other[[2]](#endnote-2).

Similar urban festivities continued in the following Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1644 and 1644 -1912), as discussed by Chen who adapted the concept of the ‘Carnivalesque’ by Bakhtin Mikhail and explained how the Qing commercial streets provided a unified space for people from different social groups to mix freely during the Chinese traditional Yuanxiao Festival[[3]](#endnote-3). Meng suggested that during the festivals and other special occasions depicted on traditional paintings, urban space was represented with two layers of meanings, the physical or worldly layer and the cosmos layer which established an aesthetic connection between a prosperous city and the entire human world[[4]](#endnote-4).

In the same period, leisure became recognised as an integral part of normal existence in Jiangnan. This change was associated with organising a new social group in these commercial streets; the so-called ‘martial art heroes’ who indulged in leisure activities in teahouses and restaurants rather than pursuing study. Their appearance in public spaces highlights a significant change in attitudes about official career paths through the civil service examination. This ubiquitous imperial examination helped to shape many aspects of Chinese society since the Song dynasty, based on Neo-Confucian orthodoxy[[5]](#endnote-5). But new choices of leisure signified alternative life choices that were different from those based on common knowledge of the classics and its literary style[[6]](#endnote-6).

The word ‘festival’ means either ‘a day or period of celebration, typically for religious reasons’, or ‘an organized series of concerts, plays, or films, typically one held annually in the same place’[[7]](#endnote-7). The study therefore asks the following research questions: how has festival space been represented in today’s commercial space in China? What are the links between contemporary design for ‘urban festivity’ and those found in history? To what extent do contemporary ‘traditionally styled commercial streets, that serve as festive spaces, both reveal and conceal the historic dimensions of festival events when constructed in new materials and technologies?

# **Water Street in Yancheng**

Yancheng (Salt City) historically was a place in Jiangnan area that was well known for the harvest of sea salt. The city is also famous as the home of Fan Zhongyan, governor in Salt City in the 12th Century who is best remembered for his aphorism that the Confucian gentleman should be the 'first to worry about the world's problems and last to enjoy its pleasures’[[8]](#endnote-8).

The Water Street project was identified as a leading initiative to demonstrate and celebrate cultural heritage in the city’s new town in 2008. One aim of the design was for new streets not only to provide a multifunctional place for food, shopping, entertainment and leisure, but also to create an ideal environment in the city by incorporating the adjacent Chan Chuan River within the new development. This combination was specifically intended to highlight that Salt City constitutes “a city with green water and as the capital of Wetland”. According to the brief, buildings in Water Street should be constructed in the traditional *Hui* style found in Huizhou, an adjacent town which is well known for its grey tiled roof and white walls.

Due to the restrictions of using timber in China, almost all the traditional elements of buildings in Water Street are, in fact, made from concrete with steel structural reinforcement, despite their appearances that resemble timber structures[[9]](#endnote-9). In design terms, three themes were introduced and represented along three parallel axes that define Water Street. The first axis is called a ‘Centre of Human and Culture’, consisting of a traditional local governor’s office, *yamen,* foregrounded by a public square. In front of the *yamen* compound is Fan Zhongyan’s statue. His ‘public-spirited' style of Confucianism found full expression in the symmetrical layout of a series of courtyards in the *yamen*, an architectural language for Chinese palaces and traditional governor’s offices in China[[10]](#endnote-10).

Along the second axis are ‘Plaza of Water in Paradise’ and ‘Pavilion of Water and Cloud’. The auspicious names of these two places are built around the experience of happiness found in “a paradise on earth” (*Runjian Tiantang*). A leading Neo-Confucian scholar in the Song dynasty, Zhu Xi (1130-1200) who was highly regarded for his teaching on unorthodox Confucian principles in the region, believed that happiness consisted of the realization that there was a fundamental unity between the individual and the rest of the cosmos[[11]](#endnote-11).

Another building sited along second axis is the Salt Ancestor Temple which celebrates five salt gods and goddesses. The associated rituals and legendary stories are related to certain festivals and mythical narratives that muted the religiosity of the temple. In contrast to the orthodox Confucian principles *li (*courtesy and morality in order to discipline desire), these legends associated with the temple advocated *qing* (romantic love or feelings), including a love story relating to the salt goddess. Opponents of the elevation of *li* to the status of an ontological truth in the Ming dynasty claimed that the so-called divine principle of *li* was simply a figment of the human mind[[12]](#endnote-12). One of the leading characters that advocated *qing* was Feng Menglong, a vernacular writer and poet of the late Ming dynasty who was born in Suzhou. He failed to pass the civil service examinations, but devoted himself to collecting and editing vernacular plays and folk songs. Feng helped to raise the position of vernacular fiction and drama to that of high art[[13]](#endnote-13).

Along the third axis is a winehouse and a restaurant along the Yi Water and Theatre on Water (Figure 1), which signify happiness in leisurely life. Lee’s study about the feelings and emotions expressed in Chinese novels from the 19th century identified significant changes that find resonance in these architectural elements. Traditional orthodox Confucian encompasses a range of values and experiences that was not in favour of expressing outward individual emotions[[14]](#endnote-14). Lee argues that changes were brought by the May Fourth Movement in 1919 when intellectuals were enthusiastically in favour of understanding emotion and other universalizing norms of enlightenment humanism and nationalism. Later in the socialist era after 1949, there was an attempt to “resolve the basic conflict of modernity between the heroic and the everyday as well as to address the paradoxical status of emotion in the modern episteme”[[15]](#endnote-15). Fitzgerald also points out that a new idea of a self-conscious individuality took place in the ‘literary revolution’ of modern China, intertwined with the notions of the awakening of a national self identity in China[[16]](#endnote-16).

<Figure 1 here>

Whatever questions/criticisms can be raised about the superficial nature of reproducing timber construction in concrete, the three themes that inform Water Street demonstrably seek to inherit a deep tradition of social and literary change that are embedded in the culture of the commercial built environment. The design of the spatial arrangements of streets consciously inherited ideas from many traditional paintings that represented cities during festive events. As Wang Zhenhua has observed, traditional paintings depicted in different ways festivals in Chinese cities’ throughout history[[17]](#endnote-17). For example, *Shang Yuan Deng Cai Tu* (‘Picture of Coloured Lanterns in Lantern Festival’) illustrates the activities during the Lantern Festival: a coloured lantern parade, fireworks and acrobatic performances in theatre and on streets. Spectators are shown watching these spectacles along streets and from first floor windows overlooking these public thoroughfares. They enjoyed examining paintings, gazing at flowers and fishes in the open markets and in shops. Both performers and spectators mingled and formed crowds. In such representations, commercial activities and festival events were intertwined in those moments, a feature of public life that has long pervaded Chinese culture. Wang argues that the two paintings mentioned above represent ‘unofficial entrainment activities’ in the city, which was very different from those presented in the more famous painting *Ching Ming Shang He Tu* (‘Along the River During the Qingming Festival’), originally produced in the Song dynasty, which illustrates how people were busy in their working lives in more officially ordered fashion with little commercial activity evident[[18]](#endnote-18).

By constructing traditional style streets, canal, temple, theatres and restaurants, the traditional Chinese style buildings and associated urban spaces become vehicle to carry the memories of traditional festivals because they are very different from the contemporary urban spaces in the city. In attempting however to imitate traditional timber construction by using concrete, for the purpose of preserving forests, the whole commercial enterprise reveals an obvious paradox; by arguing for the rebuilding of historical streets there is a danger that buildings in the end appears less convincingly historical, which attaches less value to material culture and the predisposition to issues of authenticity, a topic that is beyond the scope of this current study. In spite of these reservations the construction teams and craftsmen have innovatively sought to reproduce traditional forms that are required by the design, by exploring new ways of using contemporary materials and technologies.

In practice, there was little guidance or record to follow in terms of how to use contemporary materials and technologies to construct traditional style buildings that can represent three themes mentioned above. In order to ensure the details of windows, doors, tiles, bridges, and city gate were built in ‘authentic’ traditional forms, experienced carpenters, tile makers and other traditional craftsmen in the area were mobilized to work for the project during its construction period. This remind us what Ryckmans appreciated the views by Victor Segalen (1878-1919) who observed how Chinese in-built obsolescence in buildings: ‘[E]ternity should not inhabit the building, it should inhabit the builder. The transient nature of the structure is like an offering to the voracity of time; for the price of such sacrifices, the constructors ensure the everlastingness of their spiritual designs[[19]](#endnote-19).

In Yan Li’s interviews with visitors to Water Street, there were two kinds of different expectations for people’s visits[[20]](#endnote-20). Around 70 percent people visited Water Streets because it not only provided visual images of a local historical city, but also allowed visitors to have bodily experience in the place: watching local performances, walking along with actors dressed as imperial officers ‘working’ in *yamen* or dressed as fish man paddling boats in canals, tasting local food, dressed in traditional clothes and taking photos. About 30 percent of visitors were residents in the city who came to the street to relax because of its pleasant environment. The generous open public space, well-maintained green areas and water bodies eventually became the ‘real life’ inseparable from their daily activities. Within all the visitors, only six percent visitors pointed out that those were fake traditional styles. It also became apparent that many visitors didn’t know the local history, but overall the connected memory of the traditional Jiangnan urban landscape was recognised. As Wang suggested that traditional festival streets transferred urban spaces into special landscapes and sceneries, bearing similar functions as authentic historical sites did. This was a public space for everyone to participate, the same as what popular arts provided in market place for common people in history[[21]](#endnote-21).

Paradoxically, traditional forms of buildings in Water Street created by builders are now associated with the historical festival contents, rather than with materials and technologies of construction. Carrying meanings associated with traditional festivals rather than contemporary materials and its context is the role of the traditional style commercial streets in contemporary Chinese societies.

# **Old Street in Kunming**

If Water Street typifies festival space as a self-consciously designed enterprise in Jiangnan area, Old Street in Kunming constitutes a historic street comprising traditional courtyard houses built in the Ming and Qing dynasties[[22]](#endnote-22). Kunming is a city located on the Southwest borderland of China. Different from the Jiangnan area, the province was famous for their 26 ethnic groups living in the region with very different cultures, although the Confucian teaching has influenced the region since the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368)[[23]](#endnote-23). Kunming city, as the capital of the province, went through rapid urbanization after economic reforms in the 1980s. Many traditional streets were demolished to give way to wider roads and high-rise buildings. As the last surviving traditional street in the city, Wenming street was identified as a protected area for traditional buildings by the city planning department in the 1980s. Unlike Water Street, with its inherited themes from Confucius teaching and commercial space in Jiangnan area, the ambition in this case was to renovate and restore old buildings in their original historic situations following the principles of “renovate old building as the original historic form and structure”. Due the changes of the planning policy, it was eventually decided that the whole Wenming Street should be protected to retain the context of a traditional commercial district[[24]](#endnote-24). Developers were brought in to provide funding to refurbish traditional timber buildings on one side of the street and to develop the other side as a commercial street with mixed building styles and architectural elements.

Apart from a number of courtyard houses that were restored as listed buildings, the rest of the development has adopted the mixture of old and new architectural design language. (Figure. 2) For example, window shutters on buildings on the street generally used timber as material, establishing a link with traditional materials in listed buildings. However, rather than adopting the traditional window patterns, the new ones were made into vertical geographical lines, which gave the expression of contemporary and modern rather than traditional. The new streets with concrete paving was also designed with changed views when visitors move through open and closed public spaces, similar to traditional streets. The organizers and management for the street did not assign the events on street to certain themes. A variety of shops selling fashion clothing, traditional crafts, fast food and traditional food sit side by side, expressing full hedonism.

<Figure 2 here>

In order to attract investments for the project to protect listed buildings and their surrounding environment on one side of the street, the regulations and building codes that applied to the opposite side of the street were relaxed, to allow contemporary design with new materials and technologies. Consequently, the street is defined as a spatial ‘juxtaposition’ between restored historical fabric on one side and contemporary commercial developments on the other. As a result, there is no consistent architectural expression of the street. Architecture is defined as a duality of stylistic and material relationships and their associated modes of craftsmanship; including the connections between spaces, together with functions and the movement of pedestrians. In Kunming, the Old Street is a popular place for both visitors to the city and local citizens, primarily because of its location in city centre.

# **Conclusion:**

In this study, we have examined how contemporary Chinese attitudes towards the locations of traditional festive events in historic mercantile streets actively draw upon their commercial potential, and at the same time generate a desire to revive or preserve a heritage of social participation. This study explores themes relating to these intersections between building and festive occasion through an examination of two traditionally designed commercial streets in China. Architecture in these two cases presents in different ways a ‘foregrounding’ of festivals, in which participants are reminded of previous events.

The manner in which the Water Street development in Salt City was accompanied by 're-enactments' of festive rituals, visible both along the public pathways and the canals/waterways. 'Reconstruction' of traditional commercial streets serves as the backdrop for conscious re-inventions (or simulations) of temporal acts relating to procession and movement. The contemporary materials and technologies were used to mimic the traditional forms and materials which invariably raise important questions about authenticity and meaning. Rather than separating the architectural language to express tectonic composition and technology from the expression for principles in life and emotions in literature language, traditional building forms were used to pursue transferable expressions for political, spiritual, and emotional meanings embedded in architectural composition. In this case, we argue that questions concerning the absence of ‘authentic' material culture in the commercial street, where concrete as a viable and convincing substitute to age-old crafts in timber construction, is partly mitigated by the semblance of re-authenticating the setting through human acts and gestures.

In Old Street in Kunming, however, identity of place is graded in the new and old buildings, as well as commercial shops and commodities. Therefore, a mixture of contemporary and historical architectural languages presents another kind of built environment for festivals that consciously expresses stylistic divisions, which the festival event itself serves to reconcile. In both cases however, we can see how, architecture presents itself as an effective camouflaging and mediating device to both reveal and conceal the historic dimensions of festival events, even when these are no longer actively performed.

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