# Feasibility Study on Traditional Chinese Culture in Modern City Image Designs

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## Abstract

The Chinese nation created resplendent ancient architecture civilization. Its splendid urban design arts used to be revered and imitated by the large cities in Asia and Europe, or even the whole world. With the changes of history, however, the city designs culture of China is having great crisis and challenge under the impact of western culture since modern times. The "old style buildings" no longer exist in Beijing, an ancient city. What we can see now is that the sporadic ancient buildings are standing lonely among the architectural forests of iron and steel to show their gracious bearing as previous national architecture. The serene and profound streets full of poetic illusions in the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River were also replaced with the formulized high-rise buildings in modern cities. The lack of cultural connotations in modern city designs has aroused more and more extensive attention within the industry. There's increasingly stronger desire for traditional cultures regression in order to reappear the cultural features of Chinese nation cities.

**Key words:** Traditional cultures; Modern cities; Image design

## 1. CITY DESIGNS & CULTURE

City designs enhanced their attention to culture with the constant social development and rapid economic progress.

Generally speaking, the relationship between culture and city designs includes primarily traditional technique application and regional economic promotion. If we have further exploration, however, it will be not difficult to find that governments have multiple and complicated reasons in adopting cultural strategy in city designs in order to realize city development and regional culture promotion. At the same time, the use of cultural strategy in the field of city designs is unceasingly changing together with the national macroscopic development trend in different areas.

First, different attitudes of the state and competent government bodies to culture and arts have direct impact on the role the cultural strategy plays in city designs. China didn't carry out the policy of reform and opening up to the outside world from the founding of the People's Republic of China to the eighth decade of last century. There were obvious ideological characteristics in terms of city designs and development operations. The urban infrastructure construction was in line with the then relatively conservative political ideas. Both central government and local governments revealed negligence and indifference to the concept of national culture. On the other hand, the use of regional and local cultures was obstructed to a great extent due to the restrictions to people's subjective initiatives. With the practice of the policy of reform and opening up to the outside world, the idea of market economy was extensively spread and gradually infiltrated into all walks of life of the society. There were new changes to the targets of city construction and development. The position and the role of city construction and development in the society also had brand new transitions. That is, there was the change of from the standard of satisfying the political administration requirements under special period to the basis of meeting the needs of people's development and consumption. National arts and cultural sentiments were liberated to a certain degree. Influenced by this broad environment,

both local governments and competent city design authorities were facing completely new opportunities and higher degree of challenges. They had to consider the requirements to cultural features in city development, and tried hard to play the important role of national and regional cultures in city designs.

After the implementation of the policy of reform and opening up to the outside world, both the state and competent governmental authorities properly eased the control to culture, and relaxed strict control over and management to local governments. The administrative functions of local governments are broader and they have enormous space to play their roles no matter on administration scope or on functional authorities. Upon entering into the new century, some local governments demonstrate their city charms and features to the outside world by holding internationally large-scale exhibitions or matches. Based on similar cases, city governments developed and accumulated rich and beneficial experience. They implement culture development strategies and stimulate cultural consumptions while pushing for regional culture development as the direction of city development. Such cities gradually increase the considerations and attention to the space and resources required for cultural industry, which create the conditions for the cities to develop in future economic development.

When living in a modern society with sharp increase of material standard of living, people are stronger in their thirst for cultural and spiritual pursuit. Therefore the cultural industry experiences rapid development momentum. This is objectively necessary in order to create a good environment for cultural product production and consumption, and to establish a building environment matching with the connotations of city culture. City designs also need to enhance the development of public city culture and art facilities in order to strengthen the cultural connotations based on different situations in different part of the regions.

The positive role the culture plays in city development is obvious to all. Currently, the rapid globalization as well as the exchanges and the collision of eastern and western world are more intensive. The important role and significance of cultural connotations in the field of city design becomes more outstanding. Under the guidance of the objective rules for city development, city designs should take the cultural souls and supports as its basis in order to realize the modernizations and to meet the new needs of city development under the new situations. This should be a key issue for special consideration in terms of city construction in China.

## 2. DILEMMA OF TRADITIONAL CULTURE INTEGRATION IN CITY IMAGE DESIGNS

### 2.1 Lacking of Traditional Culture in City Image Designs

The soul of a city rests with its cultural connotations in nature. The charm of a city is not modern buildings piled up by modern technologies. Instead, it is the historical contents which are embedded into and shown silently in the city. A city lacking in cultural contents is like a body without soul, let alone its long-term development and prosperity. As to city design, traditional culture is a wealth treasury which comes into existence through long period of deposition. It is a kind of mass culture taking into shape under the influence of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Such culture has not only rich spiritual contents, but is more reflected in the buildings, which are the sediments of traditional culture. A city, as the major residential area for people, bears the context of historical development of human society. It records the history and culture of different regions and nationalities. Traditional culture heritage is the unique resource which has a positive role to city development. We should incorporate traditionally national culture into city designs as an important part if we have deep considerations from the comprehensive perspective of overall city development. This will be good for maintaining the soundness and sustainability of city development.

Since modern times, the composite role of a multiple of elements such as social progress, economic development, and population explosion has become the push of worldwide urbanization process. The urbanization process of developing countries is particularly eminent. From the early stage of the founding of the People's Republic of China till now, the number of cities in China increased from the originally less than 200 to over 600 at present. Urbanization brings over a brand new development to Chinese society. Nevertheless, the important role of traditional culture to city designs was neglected during the urbanization development process. Historical buildings were destroyed wantonly. The city designs with modern western countries as the templates came true constantly. The cultural contents were seriously lost. The "old style buildings" no longer exist in Beijing, an ancient city. The serene and profound streets full of poetic illusions in the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River were also replaced with the formulized high-rise buildings in modern cities. The landmark building of German style in Jinan City which had been existed for nearly eighty years—Old Jinan Railway Station, was demolished. The ancient city walls of more than one thousand years old in

Xiangfan City as torn down at one night. The thematic culture of a city must be established in the process of urbanization because it enables the vague city image and brand to become prominent brightly.

By ignoring the soul content of traditional culture, city designs were blindly in pursuit of the so-called modernization and western style. International designers came to China to submit their products. They took China as the experimental field for their architectural designs. Due to the cultural background differences, some international architects only hope that their designs are "fresh, strange, and unusual". So their design products disregard the special situations in China. The construction and operation costs of making their designs come true are excessively high. Furthermore, technical risks are found in their designs. All these result in some negative effects to China's city construction, economic and social development, or even to the national image. The designs made for old cities which have the contents of culture and history were completely destroyed. The cultural and historical inheritance was broken. New city designs endlessly adopt western concepts. Thus there are no regional characteristics or national customs in the new cities erected. The traditional culture contents are nothing to talk about. The loss of traditional cultural elements in city designs has made people worry about the long-term development of cities.

## 2.2  Challenges of Using Traditional Cultures in City Image Designs

The inheritance and development of traditional culture is the objective requirements to city development as well as the contents which have to be considered in city designs, which take harmonious and long-term development as their target. But we need to notice that the use of traditional culture in city designs is a complicated screening process, which needs people to pay hard and long efforts. If we take cultural elements as an abstract entirety, they have both positive and negative impacts on city development. As an enormous and complex spiritual system, every culture is sure to have its intrinsic and stable basic constitutions. Specifically speaking, there are both essence and dross in a culture. The essence and dross are interwoven so tightly that people are hard to separate them from each other. Let's take the advocation to virtue and righteousness in traditional culture as an example. They urge people to get rid of the constraints of money and material things in social development. So people's spiritual realms are sublimed when they follow these elements. While these two factors are used in city construction, the words that money "is taken in a right way and is spent properly" are also of great significance to professional ethics enhancement of people and harmonious development of city economy. From another perspective, however, the reinforcement of economic morality and the dilution of utilitarian will inevitably hinder the smooth production and the operation of the economy, which reduces the competitiveness of city development to some extent.

The complexity and versatility of culture and the interconnection of strengths and weaknesses in traditional culture tell us that the excellent and essence factors will not play a positively promotional role by isolating themselves out of the cultural entirety. Since China is a large agricultural county with a long history, the driving role out of ethic culture with deep agricultural colors to the society is more demonstrated in people's abstract and deep spiritual minds. The backward elements of petty farmer consciousness reveal their strong obstruction to social and economic development. They give rise to all phenomena hindering social development out of traditional culture like the lacking of pioneering spirit and sense of competition as well as the obstinate inertness and sluggishness. Therefore the use of traditional culture in city designs is a complicated and long task. We need to break the shackles of petty farmer economy. According to the situations of modern society development, we will restructure the essence of traditional culture and put it into every aspect of city designs. In this way, we can gradually play the promotional role of traditional culture to city construction and development under the guarantee of mechanism and system.

# 3. RESPECTING TRADITIONAL CULTURE & HARMONIOUS CITY DEVELOPMENT

## 3.1  Use of Traditional Culture in New City Designs

The design of a new city, especially the design of a medium- or large-scale public building needs to respect the features of traditional culture and gives the full play of its charms. The characteristics of a city culture are usually expressed in two ways: external forms and internal ways. The external forms include buildings, roads, and public facilities. The internal ways cover folk traditions, folk customs, and economic development. No matter whatever the expression form is, culture is at the dominating position. Compared with other social factors like geographic conditions and economic situations, traditional culture represents the unique feature of a city. So it is more easily attract people's interest to the city. For example, the Forbidden City and Tian'anmen are the representatives of Beijing and Suzhou Classical Gardens stand for Suzhou City.

The integration of traditional culture in city designs admits of no delay under the grim situation of global convergence of cultural development. Making references to multiple elements such as regional features, folk customs, folk traditions, and ancient architectural styles,

the designers should comprehend and master the essence of traditional cultures contained in them. Then they can find the artistic inspirations for city designs and put the designs into practice. In this way, they will create outstanding buildings which carry over the essence of traditional culture and reflect the features of modern culture. This is the inevitable objective of modern city designs in China.

## 3.2 Traditional Culture Protection & Development in Old City Designs

People should observe the principle that buildings and facilities reflecting the essence of traditional national and historical cultures will be strictly protected, inherited, and carried forward during the old city designs. The old city designs should pay attention to the regular repair to and infrastructure improvement of traditional buildings. Proper protection areas or buffer zones must be set up if necessary. The densities and heights of buildings around the old city must be restricted so as to protect and inherit the original city forms to the maximum extent. The original city planning should be respected and followed. Protection should be given to the street layouts with historical representations. People need to stick to the development on the basis of protection. Actions such as blind demolition and removal of old buildings should be rejected. Excessive imbalance should be avoided in the development of new and old cities. There should be the organic combination of national culture inheritance with modern social development and the protection of old city zone with the development of new city areas.

## 3.3 Normative & Legislative City Designs

One of the major problems in city designs is to balance the interrelated and complicated relationship between tradition and modernity, culture and economy, and new things and old things. The purpose is to achieve the coordination and unification in all aspects. Therefore, city designs needs to attract and accept the attention and participation of the general public. They need to draw on the wisdom of the masses. Transparent supervision and management should also be available. All relevant laws, regulations, and rules must be strictly observed. All competent authorities should intensify their supervisions and administrations so that the assessment and review work of city designs is open and transparent. These authorities need to provide multiples of assurance measures. The final target is to make traditional culture harmoniously and organically integrated into modern city designs.

## CONCLUSION

Culture is the source on which a city depends to survive and develop. It reflects a city's competitiveness within the range of the whole world. The convergence of global cultures also has impact on city designs in China. Modern western buildings with the same pattern are of common occurrences. The charms of old cities no longer exist. There's nothing good or unusual in new cities. The prospect for urbanization development is worrisome. The loss of national culture connotations in city designs sounded the alarm to us. The reality poses quite ordeal test to the development of city designs in China. There's every phenomenon showing that traditional culture will inject into brand new vigor and vitality for city development only when it is organically integrated into city designs. City designs should learn widely from other people's strong points, learn internationally advanced ideas and technologies. They also need to absorb the nourishments from the vault of traditional Chinese culture. Combining these two things together, they can explore the proper city design concepts complying with the current conditions of China on the basis of the contemporary background. City designs need to respect traditional culture. They need traditional culture so as to reveal the connotations and national charms of different cities.

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