

“Chineseness”: A Discussion on Cases Related to Tulou in Contemporary Chinese Architecture

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Abstract: The article delves into the concept of “Chineseness” in contemporary Chinese architecture, a strategic tool for creating distinctive styles rooted in Chinese identity. It serves not only to distinguish projects from market-driven trends but also to establish a pivotal position in the global architectural landscape. “Chineseness” among 24 identified keywords represents a practical strategy embraced by many young architects with international exposure. The traditional Chinese dwelling, a symbol of familial and cultural essence, particularly in the context of home culture, is a primary inspiration for contemporary architects. The research adopts a case study approach, focusing on Tulou-related cases from the last fifteen years, encompassing various building types. The Tulou, a mountain-dwelling with rich cultural connotations, is introduced, reflecting ancient Chinese philosophies in its architectural principles. The case studies, including URBANUS’s “Tulou Collective Housing 2008” and Chengdu’s “Tulou Theater,” demonstrate how Tulou prototypes can be creatively adapted. These designs not only replicate forms but also capture the communal spirit inherent in traditional dwellings. “Stepped Courtyards” by OPEN Architecture reinterprets Tulou typology for a staff dormitory, emphasizing community awareness. In conclusion, the concept of “Chineseness” emerges as a prominent topic, showcasing the dynamic and adaptable nature of traditional Chinese culture and modern architectural expressions. The cases illustrate the evolving intersection between traditional Chinese culture and modern architecture, offering insights into the future trajectory of Chinese architectural culture. The interrelated keywords highlight the nuanced and evolving nature of “Chineseness” in architectural practices.

Keywords: Chineseness; Tulou; Contemporary Chinese Architecture; Cultural identity; Traditional dwelling

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1. Introduction

In the quest for identity recognition, the term “Chineseness” denotes a tool for creating styles or paradigms with distinct Chinese characteristics ^[1]. This strategic approach not only facilitates differentiation from market-driven projects but also contributes to establishing a pivotal position in the global mainstream architectural trends ^[2,3]. Among the 24 key terms, “Chineseness” falls under the category of practical strategies, emphasizing the proactive consideration of architectural practices by many contemporary Chinese architects with international educational backgrounds (**Figure 1**) ^[1]. This sensitivity, derived from international experiences and perspectives, prompts them to contemplate their stance within the dichotomy of globalization and locality, determining the

position to be adopted and how to interpret Chineseness in a contemporary context ^[2].

Discussing Chineseness inevitably leads to the quintessential concept of the Chinese home, the traditional dwelling. Home, an eternal topic, holds particular significance for the Chinese people. Home culture constitutes the core of traditional Chinese culture, and the linguistic elements of traditional dwellings, rich with vivid details, arguably serve as the most direct manifestation of Chineseness. This representation of Chineseness is also evident in contemporary architectural designs, exemplified by architect Yuan Feng’s design proposal for a theater in Fujian. Employing parametric design techniques, Feng ingeniously incorporates traditional handcrafted materials and the prototype of Tulou, establishing a connection between tradition and Chineseness.

The prevalence of contemporary architectural designs that, to some extent, draw inspiration from traditional dwelling forms or design philosophies is not uncommon. Architects, whether intentionally or unintentionally, express Chineseness in this process, unveiling the inheritance and critique of traditional spatial types in contemporary architectural design. It can even be argued that this architectural cultural phenomenon itself serves as a manifestation of Chineseness.

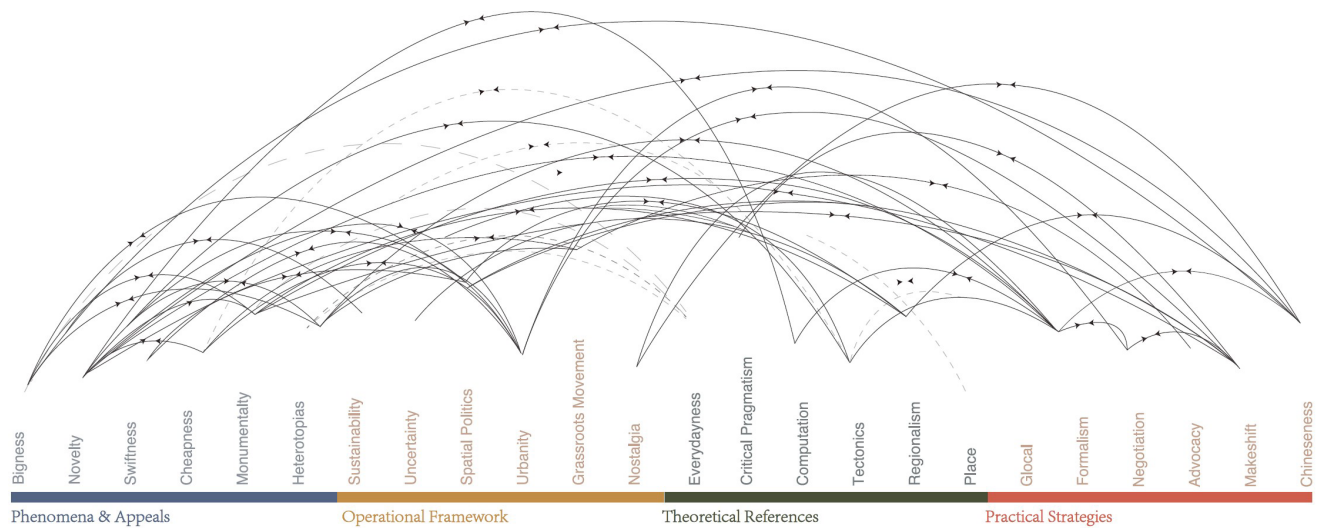


Figure 1. 24 Keywords for Contemporary Chinese Architecture ^[2]

2. Research approach

This article will start with the basic introduction of Tulou, analyze three contemporary Chinese architectures related to Tulou, and discuss the embodiment of their “Chineseness.” Case analysis is the main research method. The time of the case is within the past fifteen years, and the building types include apartments, theaters, etc.

3. Information about Tulou

Tulou can be described in one sentence as “Transforming living spaces into enclosures, residing within” (Figure 2). Tulou is a fortress-like, courtyard-style mountain dwelling, which was first built in the mountainous area of Fujian by the Central Plains people who migrated south during the Western Jin Dynasty. Unlike the people who first migrated to the fertile plain areas, the later people could only move into the mountainous areas, and they were called the Hakka people. This architectural form could accommodate more families at that time and resist some natural disasters, animals, and bandits. The main construction technology is “Bamboo-reinforced Earth Walls,” which uses rammed earth and bamboo chips, stones, etc. On the elevation, there are small high windows to prevent thefts as well as very tight entrances and exits.

Tulou reflects the concepts of traditional Chinese philosophy (**Figure 3**). “Central-axis symmetry” and “three-hall layout” reflect the core concepts of filial piety, hierarchy, and courtesy. The lower hall, located at the front, serves as an entrance; the middle hall in the center is used for gatherings and welcoming guests; the upper hall, at the far end, is for sacrifices to ancestors. Looking up, one sees the circular sky; looking down, one sees the square earth, reflecting the concept of “round sky, square earth.” Unit-style layout also shows tai chi. Adaptation and coordination with the surrounding environment reflect Dao’s principle of harmonizing with nature.



Figure 2. Er Yi Building in Hua an County (Source: <https://pixabay.com/zh/>)



Figure 3. Reflection of Confucianism and Daoism (Modified by author, source: <https://pixabay.com/zh/>)

4. Case studies

Contemporary Chinese architecture has been prominently exploring the concept of “Chineseness,” seeking to integrate traditional cultural elements into modern designs. This discussion delves into two compelling cases exemplifying this trend: the “Tulou Collective Housing 2008” by URBANUS, the “Tulou Theater” in Chengdu’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Park, and OPEN Architecture’s “Retreat Courtyard.”

4.1. Tulou Collective Housing 2008

The first case, the “Tulou Collective Housing 2008” is a residential project by the Chinese architectural firm URBANUS. Inspired by the traditional collective dwellings of Tulou in Hakka, Fujian Province, this design serves as a foundation for nurturing cohesive community relations within the physical environment ^[4]. Unlike a mere formal imitation, the Tulou Collective Housing 2008 strategically addresses the issue of low-income housing, employing Tulou as a contemporary solution that transcends mere formal replication.

Tulou, a unique architectural form among Hakka dwellings, consolidates various functions, including living, storage, shops, markets, rituals, and public entertainment, within a single building volume, fostering significant cohesion. Distinct from modern dormitory buildings, Tulou exhibits an intimacy absent in conventional corridor-type dormitories, contributing to the preservation of a sense of neighborhood within low-

income communities.

The design process involves a meticulous interpretation of the Tulou prototype, encompassing aspects such as scale, spatial patterns, and functionality (**Figure 4**). By incorporating various urban environmental factors like economic considerations and natural elements, the architects aim to strike a balance among diverse factors. This comprehensive interpretation ensures the acquisition of a rich experiential foundation, providing a platform for in-depth contemplation.

Initiating from an investigation into the current status of Tulou, the study explores the adaptability of traditional Hakka Tulou in modern lifestyles, unearths its urban potential, and subsequently advances to specific virtual design scenarios. The ultimate goal is to demonstrate the feasibility of the project and propagate the research findings, offering valuable insights into the contemporary application of traditional architectural forms.



Figure 4. Tulou Collective Housing 2008 ^[4]

4.2. Tulou theater

The second case under scrutiny is the “Tulou Theater” situated in Chengdu’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Park, standing as a 24-meter-high dinner theater. Constructed with traditional fired blue bricks, this theater employs advanced techniques such as picking bricks, cutting bricks, modularization, and parametricism (**Figure 5**). These methods contribute to the creation of curved walls that generate diverse visual effects under sunlight ^[5].

In this case, the architectural team showcases a profound engagement with traditional materials and construction techniques, enhancing the visual aesthetics of the structure. The use of traditional fired blue bricks demonstrates a commitment to preserving cultural authenticity, while the incorporation of innovative methods like parametricism reflects a contemporary sensibility.



Figure 5. Intangible Cultural Heritage Park Tulou Theatre ^[5]

4.3. Stepped courtyards

The third case is OPEN Architecture’s “Stepped Courtyards” serving as the staff dormitory for Net Dragon Company on their new campus. This project is the staff dormitory when Net Dragon Company relocates to their new campus. Not far from the ocean, the open site is virtually a tabula rasa with neither much context nor a defined physical boundary ^[6] (Figure 6). The idea is to create a collective living commune with inward-facing and semi-autonomous forms that foster a strong sense of community. 3 square-shaped buildings with large central courtyards are arranged on the site at different angles. The form is inspired by the square Tulou, a vernacular residential typology in the local Fujian province, employed by early migrants from inland.

By stepping down in different ways according to wind and views, these 3 buildings each have a series of carefully landscaped open terraces to be shared by the residents. This also opens up the otherwise enclosed central courtyards to the surrounding nature, be it the mountain or the ocean. Commune residents can enjoy their free time together on these terraces with great views. Circulation is arranged on the courtyard side and connects to all the shared terraces.

These 3 stepped courtyard blocks are lifted off the ground to allow air circulation and foot traffic from outside through the courtyards. The ground has a complex folded geometry to form different mounds that appear to support the buildings above. Ancillary facilities for the dorms, such as gyms, laundry rooms, cafeterias, and convenience stores, are accommodated in these landscaped mounds, with storefronts open to the central courtyards.



Figure 6. Stepped courtyards ^[6]

Communal living and social interactions are of particular significance to these employees who are otherwise immersed in creating a virtual fantasy world every day, subconsciously becoming part of it. The once prevalent socialist communal living is reinterpreted here in a new context. More importantly, staff in different positions are living together equally, sharing the same resources and public spaces, which reflects and stimulates further changes to the culture of the company.

These cases are related to Tulou’s attempt to create a sense of fairness between units, sharing of open space, community awareness, neighborhood feeling, and intimacy to a certain extent, which is similar to the pursuit of traditional residential culture.

5. Conclusion

In contemporary Chinese architectural discourse, “Chineseness” stands out as a significantly discussed topic, embodying the amalgamation of traditional Chinese culture with modern architectural expressions and asserting the recognition of China’s architectural cultural identity. This paper initiates with an exploration of the

fundamental characteristics of Tulou, followed by an analysis of three contemporary Chinese architectural cases associated with Tulou. These cases include the “Tulou Collective Housing 2008” by URBANUS, the “Retreat Courtyard” by OPEN Architecture, and the Tulou Theater in Chengdu’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Park. They collectively illustrate how Chinese architects of the present era articulate “Chineseness” by drawing inspiration from the architectural forms, materials, and construction techniques of Tulou.

These cases underscore that “Chineseness” is not a static concept; rather, it undergoes continual evolution in response to the shifting tides of time^[3,7]. The understanding and expression of “Chineseness” by contemporary Chinese architects undergo dynamic transformations influenced by the forces of globalization and the trajectory of China’s economic development. The manifestation of “Chineseness” in contemporary Chinese architectural culture contributes to a nuanced comprehension of the fusion between traditional Chinese culture and modern architectural practices, fostering a deeper understanding of China’s architectural cultural identity.

In addition, due to the correlation between keywords, an architectural design may reflect multiple keywords. For example, the second architectural case: Tulou Theater, adopts the method of parametric design but uses traditional hand-made building materials and the prototype of Tulou to interpret the relationship with tradition, thus establishing a connection with Chineseness. However, its overall practice strategy may present a kind of critical pragmatism.

In conclusion, the article delves into the multifaceted dynamics of “Chineseness” within contemporary Chinese architectural culture, emphasizing its fluid nature and the intricate interplay of global influences and domestic economic progress. The examination of Tulou-related cases provides valuable insights into the nuanced expressions of “Chineseness” and offers a foundation for envisioning the future trajectory of Chinese architectural culture.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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