

Architectural Heritage Conservation based on Authenticity

-- Taking Bell Tower Area of Xi'an as an Example

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Abstract

With the development of cities and the continuous improvement of urbanization level, people began to reflect on the current development model, how to balance urban land development and architectural heritage protection. People marvel at the rapid development of Beijing's urban construction, but also at the disappearance of traditional buildings. For an ancient capital like Xi'an, which also has a long history, how to deal with the relationship between architectural heritage and surrounding environment, and how to coordinate the balance between development, innovation and inheritance and protection are important issues in the process of the development of Xi'an's characteristics. From the perspective of authenticity, this paper takes Bell Tower area of Xi'an as the research object, and through the analysis of current problems, satisfaction survey, case study, comparative analysis and hypothesis analysis, finally discusses the strategy of architectural heritage protection. It emphasizes that the methods of architectural heritage protection should be diversified, and the core of architectural heritage protection is the protection and inheritance of the culture and traditional crafts behind the buildings. It is not advisable to adopt a single development mode and to spread the style of archaized buildings.

Keywords

Authenticity; architectural heritage conservation; intangible cultural heritage; urban planning.

1. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the architectural heritage conservation in Xi'an, another city must be mentioned meanwhile. That is Beijing, the capital of China. More than half a century ago, with the rapid development of metropolitan construction, the master planning of Beijing that to conserve the old city proposed by Liang Sicheng is rejected back then. More and more people pay their attention to the planning and development of Xi'an by contrast with the demolition of ancient Beijing city. Within this introspection, the most hotly disputed question is the removal of old outer city wall of Beijing (Figure 1).

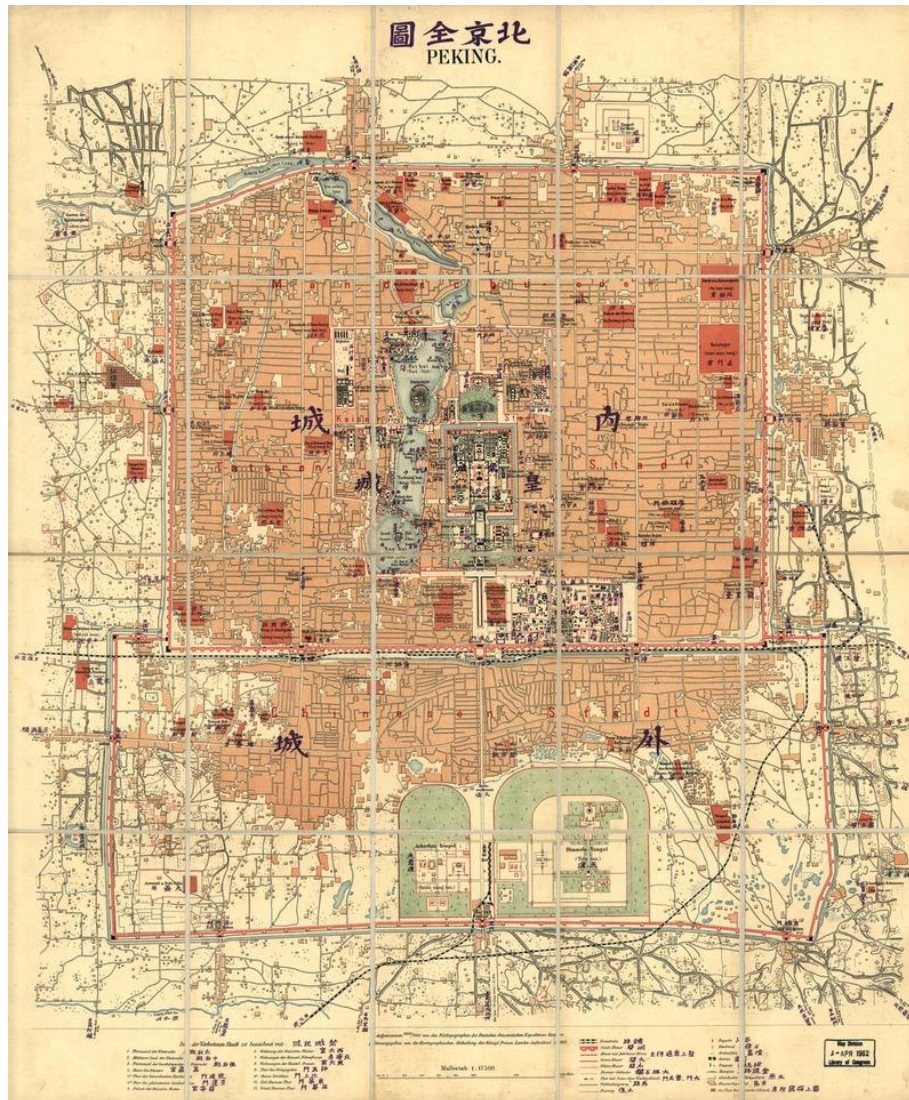


Figure 1. Map of Beijing city drawn by Prussia

Source: 20 Talks of Architectural Art in China

When people realized that the error they made is unrecoverable and began to talk about the success of architectural heritage conservation of Xi'an, what is the fact? From the bird view, it is apparent that architectural heritages are surrounded by high-rise buildings, which look like concrete screens blocking the communications between the heritages and the people. The Wild Goose Pagoda, as the commanding heights of Xi'an city, has been submerged in the concrete forests, let alone the Bell Tower which is the center of the old city.

If people protect the architectural heritage from the purely archaeological view and standards, it is plausible that many conservation methods and results are successful. However, the reason why people protect architectural heritage is neither economic value nor even historic importance, but the culture conveyed from them. As a matter of fact, the attitude toward appreciating natural scenery is the same as it toward enjoying the sight of architectural heritage. Immaterial cultural heritages are disappearing increasingly and Chinese traditional culture is being forgotten. By reflecting these problems, it is necessary to analyze the authenticity of architectural heritage which directly determines the way in conservation and the perception of people.

According to the Nara Document Authenticity generated in Nara Conference on Authenticity, it can be pointed out that architectural heritage should not be understood as a heritage value in itself, but the accuracy of relevant resource of information expressed from it. (ZOU, 2008) People should respect the culture and the social value as well as the heritage itself, even exceeding it. That is to say, architectural heritage will lose its value if it could not convey information correctly and efficiently.

With contentious discussions of authenticity, it seems to be much more complicated. On the one hand, authenticity contains many aspects in terms of surrounding environment, traditional crafts and even the lifestyle influenced by heritages. On the other hand, the connotation of authenticity is a contradiction to a degree. Actually the authenticity should be represented by aging appearance along the change of context and time instead of the origin one. (Zheng, 2005) Philosophically, the real side of architectural heritage is what it has experienced.

On this theoretical basis mentioned above, some methods and concepts involving architectural heritage conservation need to be reconsidered. Combined with the reality which is happening in Xi'an, to my way of thinking, the way in protection of architectural heritage is least diversified. What is worse, this kind of "oneness" also results in many mistakes in conservation which is unrecoverable to a large extent. Therefore, there should be a variety of interpretations and conservation methods for different kind of heritages based on authenticity, which can correctly lead people to know about the culture and traditional crafts behind heritages.

2. METHODOLOGY

At the 15th ICOMOS conference, Xi'an Declaration is been put forward. Firstly, it has stressed the importance of surrounding environment of architectural heritage and the correlation in between. Secondly, the immaterial cultural heritages deriving from the material heritages are considered as a very important aspect of conservation. In order to analyze this assumption elaborated above, the bell tower and its surrounding context that is located at the center of Xi'an old city has been chosen as the research site.

As the center of Xi'an old city, the chosen site reflects the most serious and contentious problem existing. Through the methods of current problem analysis, satisfaction survey, case study, comparative analysis and what-if analysis, the proposed assumption will be explored eventually.

3. ANALYSIS

Xi'an bell tower is the largest and best-preserved ancient bell tower in China, which was originally built in ad 1384. At ad 1584, it is relocated to the place where it is now standing. It is 36 meters high with an approximately square base. The structure is relatively stable that is made of brick and wood. As a typical architectural style of Ming dynasty, now Xi'an bell tower has become the landmark.

3.1. Surrounding Environment Analysis

From the purely archaeological view and standards, Xi'an bell tower is well preserved. There are still a large number of people especially tourists who are taking photos in front of it so far. However, this precious architectural heritage has not conveyed to people too much traditional cultural experience.



Figure 2. Xi'an bell tower (1950S)

Source: Picture China



Figure 3. Xi'an bell tower (2011)

Source: Data redrawn form tupian.baike.com

Compared with the image of bell tower half a century ago, it becomes a little bit invisible within surrounding concrete forests now. At 1980s, the government and experts had proposed a series of strategies to protect architectural heritage. Meanwhile, the importance of surrounding environment is stressed. People put forward a slogan of overall layout conservation back then (Zhang, 2003). Through the limitation of surrounding buildings' height with at most 24 meters, people of Xi'an were willing to achieve this goal of protection. But the fact backfired. The commercial buildings around like GUDU mansion made the bell tower lose

its massive volume gradually. Economic interests and dubious concepts led people under illusions about a win-win situation economically and culturally.

Approximately 10 years after that time, in 1996, a shopping mall called KAIYUAN was built to the southeast of Xi'an bell tower. (Figure 4) There is no doubt that this huge commercial building is much higher and larger than Xi'an bell tower although the accurate data of height cannot be obtained, which is really a pity.

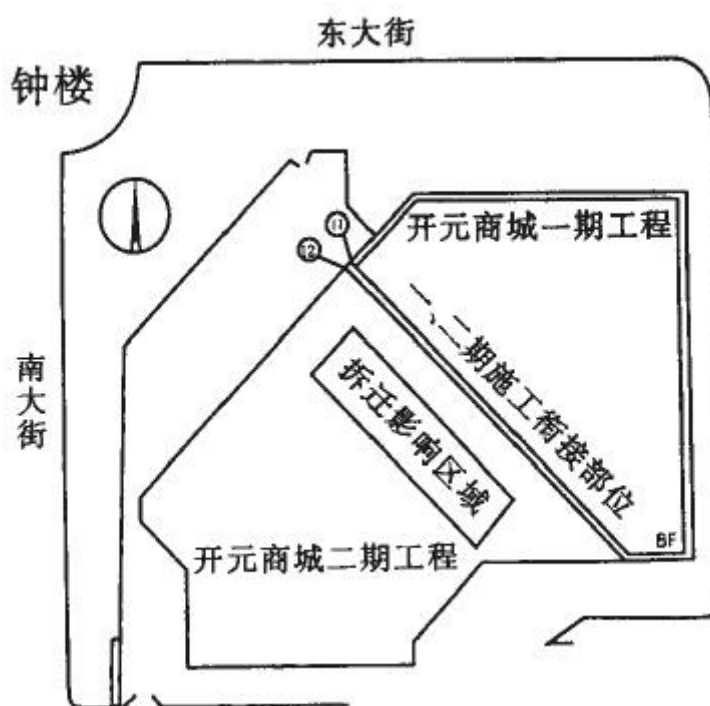


Figure 4. The map of relation between bell tower and KAIYUAN shopping mall

Source: Shaanxi Architecture

According to previous study, methods used in the protection of surrounding environment of Xi'an bell tower can be concluded. One is about isolation of roads, which makes it look like a little "island". The difficulty of this strategy is the width of road that is hard to control. Another one is about green belt isolation. It can not only promote the historical image of Xi'an bell tower but also purify the air in downtown place. It can be seen clearly from google map. (Figure 5) (Song, 2003) However, the wrong choice of building pattern results in many mistakes in conservation which destroyed the surrounding environment. Essentially, this problem is caused by "oneness" of protection. That is to say, the way in protection of architectural heritage is least diversified. People always agree with an ideal that positive impacts from some strategies can hide negative impacts from not using other strategies. But it does not work in architectural heritage conservation.

It is worth mentioning that the sunken square to the southeast of Xi'an bell tower is a good way to express respects. However, as mentioned above, unilateral advantage is not able to cover existing problems.



Figure 5. Surrounding environment of xi'an bell tower

Source: map.google.com

By contrast, the surrounding environment conservation of architectural heritage in Paris is a typically successful example. The most impressive factors in Paris are uniform color and comfortable building height. (Figure 6) By this way, many iconic architectural heritages like Arc of Triumph and Eiffel Tower are better displayed. This kind of well-preserved surrounding environment of heritages perfectly expresses the culture of France. In addition, green belt is added into the old city, which makes it full of vitality.



Figure 6. Paris old city conservation

Source: blog.sina.com

3.2. Immaterial Cultural Heritage

The immaterial cultural heritages are unfathomably potential and valuable. Although more and more regionally traditional cultures and handcrafts are listed into world immaterial cultural heritage list, our traditional culture is still increasingly disappearing over time. A majority of immaterial cultural heritages including traditional construction skills has a close relationship with architectural heritage. The mistakes in surrounding environment of architectural heritages protection have significantly negative impacts on immaterial cultural heritage conservation. On the one hand, insufficient surrounding space which is coordinated with the architectural heritage is unable to offer people enough spaces to develop related traditional handcrafts or skills. When regionally traditional cultures and handcrafts are far away from the architectural heritage, they will lose their spirits of existence. On the other hand, development of modernization has transformed people's conception that economy first. Expansion of city construction area and shrinking of conservation area has become the externally restrained factor. Eventually, people have to protect the architectural heritages themselves without too much surrounding spaces.

In Xi'an downtown place, this issue is obvious as well. Buildings along the main roads are almost commercial construction, such as huge shopping malls, luxury hotels and commercial banks. There is a very famous conventional alley to the northwest of Xi'an bell tower which is called Hui Mingjie. Within this conventional area, a variety of traditional handcrafts and foods can be easily found. However, the limitation of space has formed a large number of social problems regarding to over-crowded, bad quality of environment and functional singleness. It can be concluded that the intended win-win situation of developing both immaterial cultural heritage and social economy leads to this unexpected tragedy.



Figure 7. Themap of relation between bell tower and hui mingjie area

Source: Data redrawn form map.google.com.

Another assumption can be proposed that to connect the bell tower with Hui Mingjie area. That means the buildings in between should be removed and rebuild with new traditional constructions or green space afterwards. Firstly, this strategy extends the surrounding environment of Xi'an bell tower. Then, with the prerequisite of removal KAIYUAN shopping mall,

it will create a view corridor which can better convey traditional architectural heritage image. At the same time, social problems can be mitigated in a large degree.

Besides, ancient pitched roof and some traditional architectural symbols are encouraged from the general view. As the result of government policies, many modern buildings are imposed with fake traditional images, which look very strange and pretty uncoordinated. People hope to remedy this unfortunate situation in the way of enforced ancient architectural symbol. Undoubtedly, this ideal has its value in the conservation. However, inappropriate design and the neglect of immaterial cultural heritage have made modern buildings in Xi'an old city very fake and rough. To some degree, the "oneness" of protection resulted in the enforced symbol event. People follow the trend of construction blindly without rigorous design and planning.

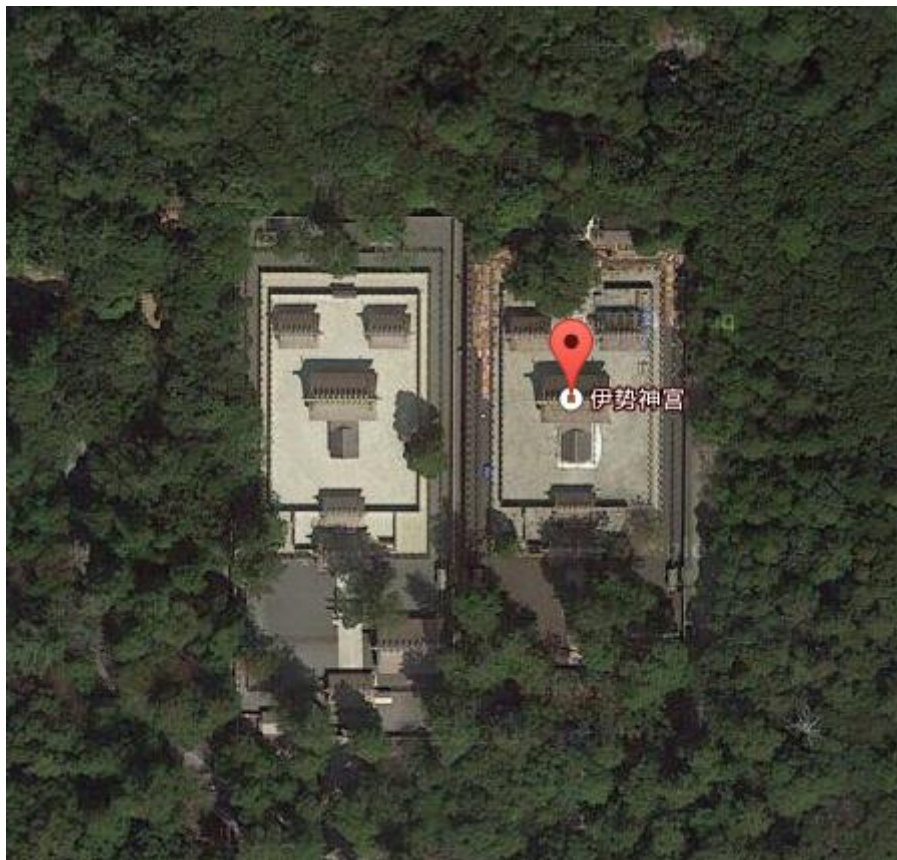


Figure 8. Naigai shrine in Japan

Source: map.google.com.

In Japan, a traditionally cultural ideal of getting rid of the stale and taking in the fresh is well accepted. Philosophically, changing is to maintain relatively stable. In the aspect of architectural heritage protection, the strategies are very diverse compared with it in China, especially in Xi'an.

Naigai Shrine conservation is a very representative example since it will be "relocated" every 20 years. People in Japan will rebuild a new one beside the old one which will be demolished afterwards. (Figure 8) Every time of relocation, it would be a significant ceremony to convey and review traditional culture. It is worth mentioning that every part of the society including the Japanese government and big companies have given enough support to this event. (Yu, 1994) It is known that Japan is famous for its engineering and probably it is easy to protect this architectural heritage well. However, what they are aimed at is not the architectural heritage itself but the immaterial cultural heritage it conveyed. In this way of protection, the Naigai Shrine

has already been there for more than 1300 years. Most importantly, the immaterial cultural heritage involving traditional cultures and handcrafts is well-preserved and passed down.

Because of the big difference in conception of heritage conservation and cultural background, it may be not suitable in Xi'an. However, this strategy is the manifestation of protection diversity. What is more, it stresses the importance of immaterial cultural heritage which is considered to be the key point within authenticity. Based on these specific strategies above, the heritage conservation in Japan has achieved great success.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis above, the basic assumption can be verified that the way in protection of architectural heritage in Xi'an is least diversified. What is worse, this kind of "oneness" involving the protection of surrounding environment and immaterial cultural heritage has also resulted in many mistakes which are unrecoverable.

It can be concluded that the fake pseudo-classic buildings and inappropriate conservation methods are because of the misunderstanding of authenticity to a large extent. Therefore, there should be a variety of interpretations and conservation methods for different kind of heritages in Xi'an based on authenticity, which can correctly lead people to know about the culture and traditional crafts behind heritages.

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