

Hyperreal Monuments of the Mind: Traditional Chinese Architecture and Disneyland

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This article analyzes Chinese and American hyperrealism and its effects on self-perceptions and cultural identities. In their respective architectural traditions both American and Chinese ambitions to retrieve a psycho-social quality succeed in circumventing common requirements of authenticity. The past is present in China in the form of the Chinese language and letters. Meanwhile, in the United States, the “Disney” approach promotes the authenticity of the copy within the “real” sphere of American civilization. In paradoxical fashion both approaches thus attempt to find authenticity and identity in a process of imitation. A comparison of the two traditions shows how authenticity is never a stable “material” entity, but rather how all monuments are somehow “monuments of the mind.”

In this article I analyze Chinese and American hyperrealism and its effect on the self-perceptions and cultural identities of both countries. I do this by concentrating on the phenomenon of architecture. Hyperreality represents an exalted or idealized reality. It is the state in which it is impossible to distinguish reality from fantasy, not because the fantasy is such a good imitation of reality, but because hyperreality produces images of something that never existed in the first place. Hyperreality creates its own standards of reality independently of any outside “real” condition. According to Jean Baudrillard, our contemporary world has been replaced by a copy within which we are fed by stimuli, and in which questions of “reality” or authenticity have become redundant. In particular, Baudrillard observed that hyperreality represents a significant paradigm of the American cultural condition. Umberto Eco, whose ideas will also be used in this essay, has described a similar concept of hyperreality as “false authenticity.”

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The state of hyperreality is common in technologically advanced cultures, where virtual reality has made the endless reproduction of fundamentally empty appearances pos-

sible. However, it is also possible to speak of hyperreality in cultural or civilizational terms. In this article I pursue this theme in the context of traditional Chinese architecture and the architecture of Disneyland, as well as in terms of the development of “cultural space” as it is perceived in both China and the United States.

THE CHINESE CULTURE OF WRITING

Derk Bodde has contrasted European and Chinese approaches to culture by pointing out that the Chinese concept of civilization/culture is based on an idea of writing as a creator of civilization. As he explained,

... our word “civilization” goes back to a Latin root having to do with “citizen” and “city.” The Chinese counterpart, actually a binome, wen hua, literally means “the transforming (i.e., civilizing) influence of writing.” In other words, for us the essence of civilization is urbanization; for the Chinese it is the art of writing.¹

To a Western *civilization of urbanization*, Bodde thus opposes a Chinese *civilization of writing*. The position and function of writing in Chinese culture vaguely reflects the constellation that the present article attempts to explain. The past is present in China not in the form of material buildings, but in the form of a substance called writing. Simon Leys has also argued that the Chinese past is a past of words and not of bricks and stones.² In this world, letters *are* culture and not *signs of* culture. In particular, Leys detected a curious Chinese concept of “putting words in space,” which he opposed to the Western idea of “putting words in time.” Such a distinction supports the constellation mentioned by Bodde. According to Leys, “While, in general and by its nature, poetical expressions are successive unfolding in time, Chinese poetry makes an effort to organize words in space.”³

The past is present in China in the form of the Chinese language and letters, both of which have remained practically unchanged for the last two thousand years.⁴ And this particular concept of “culture as writing” has had a decisive effect on the character of Chinese architecture. Leys and F.W. Mote have both expressed amazement at the negligence with which the Chinese treat the material heritage of their past; thus, even though China has a long history and is heavily loaded with memories, it has remarkably few historical monuments to visit.⁵ Leys has insisted that the disconcerting barrenness of the Chinese monumental landscape is not just the result of the destruction carried out during the Cultural Revolution; even in the beginning, the revolutionaries did not find much to destroy. He pointed out that the quasi-absence of monuments had already struck Western travelers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶

Europe, too, has known wars and destruction, but it has managed to maintain monuments dating from antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. Meanwhile, in China — except for the few most famous items — the monumental past is practically absent. One of the reasons is a tradition of iconoclasm. However, another, as Mote noted, is that, while the West has an antique presence made of authentically ancient physical objects, China does not have those, “because of . . . a different attitude towards the way of achieving the enduring monument.”⁷

True, there has been a tradition of antiquarianism in China, but, as Leys has pointed out, antiquarianism appeared very late in Chinese cultural history. Second, it remained essentially restricted to a very narrow category of objects. And third, its focus has been very much on calligraphy and painting — that is, on the exclusive prestige of the written word. In classical Chinese culture, the art of painting was nothing more than an extension of calligraphy because, Leys commented, it “had first to adopt the instruments and techniques of calligraphy before it could attract the attention of the aesthetes.”⁸ Even when connoisseurs and collectors extended their interests to bronzes and some categories of antiques, the value of these items was usually determined by the epigraphs. In other words, their interest in antiques was dependent upon writing.

This cultural characteristic has particular consequences for architecture: in China, many historical monuments are not real but hyperreal. An example of this “hyperreal history” is Suzhou’s Great Pagoda, which passes as Suzhou’s “Statue of Antiquity” (FIG. 1). Mote submitted this structure to extensive analysis, claiming that “no building with such a pedigree would count for much as an authentic antiquity even in the United States, much less in Rome.”⁹ Though the Great Pagoda’s origins are in the third century, in reality it is a twentieth-century construction. It has been constantly rebuilt over the centuries, and nothing that can be found in it is what a Westerner would call authentic. The point, according to Mote, is that

... Chinese civilization did not lodge its history in buildings. Even its most grandiose palace and city complexes stressed grand layout, the employment of space, and not buildings, which were added as a relatively impermanent superstructure. Chinese civilization seems not to have regarded its history as violated or abused when the historic monuments collapsed or burned, as long as they would be replaced and restored, and their functions regained. In short, we can say that the real past of Soochow is a past of the mind; its imperishable elements are moments of human experience.¹⁰

Most recently, the architect Li Shiqiao wrote that in China, the “commodification of the immaterial idea is predicated on the crucial notion of the authenticity of the original,” and



FIGURE 1. *The Beisi Pagoda (北寺塔), or North Temple Pagoda, located at Bao'en Temple in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, China. Courtesy of Bryan Ma.*

that this practice is both contemporary and traditional. As an example, he reported on the work of the Chinese architectural historian Liang Sicheng (1901–1972), who returned from China in the 1920s after his education at the University of Pennsylvania, and who

... was particularly disturbed by the way old relics were “renovated” at many sites he visited in China; he preferred old buildings to remain “old,” but in practice they had been renovated into similar-looking new buildings. For several decades, Liang Sicheng struggled to introduce a notion of “historical authenticity” in China through the idea of architectural history. Although he remains a well-respected figure in Chinese architecture, his ideas have not been understood in practice and the impact of his advocacy has been limited.¹¹

Mote has summarized the situation by arguing that the Chinese past is not made of stone but of words: “China [has] kept the largest and longest-enduring of all mankind’s documentations of the past. It [has] constantly scrutinized that past as recorded in words, and caused it to function in the life of its present.”¹² The Chinese have thus built no Parthenon, but rather hyperreal monuments of the mind.

To illustrate this position, Mote cited the example of the Maple Bridge in Suzhou (FIG. 2). This historic structure is not important as an *object*, but exists only as psycho-historical material or as a “poetic place” in literary history. Thus, official and historical “descriptions” of the bridge exist, but they consist most frequently of poems that capture “moments of



FIGURE 2. *Maple Bridge (Fong Qiao, 枫桥) in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, China. Courtesy of Wanchi Siu.*

experience or of reflection involving the bridge”; alternatively, they involve reference to earlier poems inspired in some indirect way by the bridge. The “historical reality” of the bridge does not seem to be important. In this sense, the bridge is a hyperreal phenomenon: “In all that psycho-historical material associated with the Maple Bridge, the bridge as an object is of little importance; we are not told of what material it is built, how big it is, or what it looks like.”¹³

The conclusion to be drawn from such an analysis is that Suzhou is a city of ancient monuments, which contains almost no ancient buildings at all. The “duration” of the monument is thus spiritual rather than material. Any “authenticity” must be seen as hyperreal because the past, tradition, and culture were never present and real in the first place, but were made of words. Mote and Leys further hold that the buildings are “ideas,” or items derived from the consciousness of those who know the poems. According to Mote, “The literary remains, merely sampled in the gazetteers, and more fully present in the libraries of scholars, are to Soochow as is the Forum to Rome. From them every educated Chinese could reconstruct a real Soochow in his mind, with cracks and the scars that mar old stones.”¹⁴

For his part, Leys is convinced that, well before Confucius, the Chinese developed the idea that history cannot be transmitted through artifacts. It is instead only transmitted through the memory of posterior humans who rely on writing for such purposes. The formula “man only survives in man” means, in practical terms, that history survives only through the medium of the written word. Leys’s thoughts were inspired by the French poet and writer Victor Segalen (1878–1919) who spent many years in China and was apparently the first European to reflect on the above problem in the Chinese context. Segalen observed that Chinese architecture is essentially made of perishable and fragile materials; as

such, it embodies a sort of “in-built obsolescence,” letting the buildings decay more rapidly so that they require frequent rebuilding. Segalen drew a philosophical conclusion from these concrete observations: that the Chinese eternity should not inhabit the building but only its builder.¹⁵

Leys’s theory has since been confirmed by anthropologists, who point out that, in the case of contemporary Chinese replicas of historical buildings, even their materials and dimensions can change considerably. Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger provided the example of recent building activities in a small community in southern China where, in order to glorify the village and its lineage, the village government

*... dismantled the main ancestral hall and erected an improved replica instead in its place — what the Chen ancestors presumably would have built had they the funds. The Chinese conception of architectural heritage does not entail preserving the actual materials that a building is composed of, and almost all of the original hall was discarded. The new replica is outfitted with more solid pillars, new beams fancifully painted with motifs from Chinese legends. . . .*¹⁶

A similar though not identical concept of historic authenticity underlies some works of traditional Japanese architecture. Thus, Emperor Temmu established the Ise Shrine (*ise-jingu*) in Mie around 680 AD as the primary Shinto shrine of imperial Japan. Though the present building is still considered the “original” by the Japanese, in reality the shrine has been ritually rebuilt every twenty years since the seventh century (FIG. 3). In a ceremony known as *shikinen sengu*, the main shrine buildings are destroyed and reconstructed on an adjacent site, leaving the neighboring site empty. The first



FIGURE 3. Ise Shrine (*Ise-jingu*, 伊勢神宮) in Ise, Mie, Japan. Courtesy of Ajari.

rebuilding took place under Temmu's wife, Empress Jito, and the most recent (the sixty-first) took place in 1993.

Periodic reconstruction is extremely expensive and can be viewed as an act of sacrifice. However, though the shrine is physically never more than twenty years old, the Japanese do not consider it a replica but an original building dating from the seventh century. For them, the shrine's identity is not based on building material; it is "produced" through the ceremonies that accompany destruction and reconstruction, as well as through Shinto tradition, which reserves a central position for the shrine. None of this could convince the international community, however; not being "old enough," the Ise Shrine has not been placed on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites.¹⁷ Two other shrines in Japan, Kamo no Wakeika-zuchi and Kamo no Mioya, are also rebuilt every twenty years. And it appears that in the past, other shrines maintained a rebuilding cycle of twenty years or longer.¹⁸

IDENTITY AND NATURE

Western common sense does not find these arguments convincing. There is the joke about the farmer who changed the handle of his axe twice and the head three times but still believed he had the same axe. No wonder many Western philosophers have called such conceptions absurd.

Since the time of the ancient Greeks, philosophers have considered this problem, which became famous as the "Ship of Theseus" paradox. The historian Plutarch first mentioned the condition of this hero's ship, which had become a sort of national monument the Greeks took great pains to repair over a long period of time — to the point that all the old planks were replaced by new ones.

The question whether the ship could still be considered the original would subsequently occupy some of the brightest European minds. Most outstanding perhaps was the Sophists' claim that the new ship could not be the real ship because, if we were to take the old planks and assemble them to build a second ship, we would be in the presence of two originals — a logical impossibility. The Sophists were pseudo-philosophers, but their claim was not pointless, and it would later be supported by Thomas Hobbes in his *De Corpore*.¹⁹ It is also in agreement with basic principles about identity established by John Locke, who wrote that only *different* things can be in the same place at the same time, and that *one* thing can have only *one* origin.²⁰

Leys and Mote have noted that in China, the negligence and destruction of historical buildings form a paradoxical relationship with the ambition to preserve the past. The point is that the Chinese — just like Japanese Shintoists — do not necessarily have another sort of logic, but rather another conception of the past. What matters is not the building material and its continuous existence but, according to David Lowenthal, the "genetic properties (maker, period, history) that distinguish the authentic from the fake."²¹

CHINESE HYPERREALITY

According to Shiqiao Li, China possesses a "powerful cultural force which is not always predicated on the unquestioned validity of the authentic form," because in this culture "the image plays a different role."²² Leys and Mote have found that in China the negligence and destruction of historical buildings form a paradoxical relationship with the Confucian ambition to preserve the past. Here the tendency to transcend reality towards a cultural ideal contained in a tradition and mediated by writing represents a clear case of culture as hyperreality.

Westerners — or, more precisely, non-Chinese or non-Japanese people (Leys does not mention the Japanese, but points out that ancient Egyptians would have found the Chinese conception of history as unusual as present-day Europeans) — tend to see the past as a reality that can be either present (in the form of an authentic building, even if it is only a ruin) or absent (destroyed). Normally, in Western cultures, history needs to be recognized *as a reality*. According to Alois Riegl, monuments are not only supposed to be old, but they must *show* their age.²³ In Europe, many have thus argued that the patina on paintings is not a sign of decay but an artistic enhancement. And recently, the search for the "real" may have become an obsession. Indeed, some have likened material preservation to a "rampant cult," as ever greater resources are devoted to the salvaging and conservation of remnants of the past in Western and many non-Western countries.²⁴ Preservation efforts have even been extended from historic buildings and historic districts to larger entities such as historic valleys, states, and bio-regions.²⁵

By contrast, the Chinese find "reality" not in the material reproduction of a building, but in the qualities and indications of it that they are able to reproduce in their consciousness. The Suzhou Maple Bridge was never meant to be more than an idea; thus, to Mote, it "was an item in the consciousness of all Chinese who ever knew the poem."²⁶ Much of the extraordinary iconoclastic character of the Cultural Revolution and similar Chinese movements — which Westerners, including Russians, often find unusually radical — can certainly be explained through this attitude. On the other hand, the Chinese inclination not to cling to material objects can be seen as notably refreshing and stimulating for present activities because it holds that old things must perish so that new ones can take their place. Yet looking more closely, there is no reason to believe that the Chinese have really freed their minds of the past: they might have abandoned the physical part of the object, but they most carefully preserve the felt continuity of history — that is, a nonmaterial past.

Such a nonmaterial concept of history can easily lead to the phenomenon of hyperreality. The hyperreal quality of Chinese history becomes particularly manifest in the historical records of the *Lantingxu*, or the "Preface of the Orchid Pavilion," a famous calligraphy by Wang Xizhi (307–365), whose story has been made accessible by Simon Leys, and

whose main points I relate here. Wang Xizhi is generally considered the greatest calligrapher of all ages, and the *Lantingxu* is one of the most commented upon calligraphies in Chinese history. But how was this work handed down? Legend states that during the first two hundred years of its existence it was kept by Wang's descendants and remained within the family; no mention was ever made of it, and seemingly, no one had the chance to see it. Two hundred and fifty years later, however, a monk made copies of it, and fifty years after that, Wang's calligraphic style aroused the enthusiasm of the Emperor Tang Taizong. As the original rubbings themselves had disappeared, new rubbings were taken from later engravings. Tang Taizong, who died in 649, then demanded that the "Orchid Pavilion" be buried with him in his grave at Zhaoling.

From then on, the prestige and influence of this calligraphy grew continuously. It was studied by calligraphers for centuries, almost sparking an interpretative tradition of its own, although nobody had ever seen the original. However, in 1965, the archaeologist Guo Moruo suggested that the calligraphy of the "Orchid Pavilion" as we know it through its Tang and Song copies must have originated at a much later date than during Wang Xizhi's reported lifetime. Guo also suggested that the text itself was probably not composed by Wang Xizhi. From these findings one might conclude that the sublime model which inspired the entire development of Chinese calligraphy may never have existed. The case clearly points to the hyperreality that can occur in a culture in which the material aspect of objects is of secondary importance.

"DISNEYFICATION"

Some people find that visiting China today is very much like participating in a game of "Fake or Real." New imitations of historical buildings are constructed everywhere, which is strangely at odds with the traditional Western view that "imitation is crime." As one blogger noted, the only way to distinguish genuine past architecture from an imitation is to find out if an entrance fee is required. And even when the building is advertised as "authentic" it might be fake by European standards.

Can this Chinese phenomenon be compared with the American approach of "Disneyfication"? Both traditions attempt to find, in paradoxical fashion, authenticity and identity in a process of imitation. Both are engaged in what Umberto Eco called a "hand-to-hand battle with history."²⁷ And their respective results are amazingly transparent in terms of motive.

Matthew Arnold once described Americans as desperate to find "a substitute for that real sense of elevation which human nature instinctly craves — a substitute which may do as well as the genuine article."²⁸ This can be opposed to a more conservative "European mind," in which imitation or even restoration is seen to express the point of view of the imitators

or restorers rather than the efforts of the artist. Any appropriation of the original efforts by the imitators is thus "immoral."

Traditionally, in the Western consciousness, imitation has also been considered "bad" because of its link to the upward-striving merchant or middle classes, eager to imitate the aristocratic lifestyle. In the late eighteenth century, cheap copies of expensive paintings were almost mass-produced, and the infamous phenomenon of "kitsch" made its first appearance. However, once a bourgeois individual had established her social position as quasi-equivalent with that of the aristocrat, she was expected to discard such items and embrace more sophisticated aesthetic and ethical standards. In a word, she was asked to recognize the value of "real" things. This explains why, within the European mindset, reality and truth are immediately linked. The effect of this ethic can still be felt today. Thus, Eco's claim that "compulsive imitation prevails where wealth has no history" remains plausible for many people.²⁹

Both American and Chinese ambitions to retrieve a psycho-social quality through imitation succeed in circumventing the usual requirements of authenticity. Eco, in his *Travels in Hyperreality*, highlighted one blatant American case: an imitation of the Venus de Milo in the Palace of Living Arts in Buena Park, Los Angeles. This work was quintessentially hyperreal because it transgressed the mechanics of simple imitation. The original sculpture, which has no arms, was created some time between 130 and 100 BC in Greece. However, the imitative version in Los Angeles has arms, for which the surprised visitor is given the justification that this is the "Venus de Milo brought to life as she was in the days when she posed for the unknown sculptor, in approximately 200 B.C."³⁰ Thus, the reproduction represents "reality" as it may have appeared to the artist while he was creating the sculpture. It retrieves a state anterior to — or more original than — anything presented by the original. It is through mechanisms like these that, in Eco's view, the completely real may be identified with the completely fake, allowing absolute unreality to be presented as real. The parallel with Wang Xizhi's "Orchid Pavilion" calligraphy is obvious. Here, reality is not simply a quality that *can be reproduced*, but is rather *the thing that is always already reproduced* (which is precisely the definition of hyperreality).

Daniel Boorstin has observed another aspect of the "collapsing of history" in American civilization, where a tradition of cultural continuity frequently renders history as homogeneous. Boorstin argued that Americans see the founding fathers as their contemporaries, which "also explains why they see no wrong with re-creating life in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries in perfect replicas of the past sold in theme parks and 'historic' villages for tourists."³¹ Eco offered another example: the reconstructed Oval Office of the President of the United States at Fortress Solitude in Austin, Texas (FIG. 4). In Eco's view, the aim of this reconstruction is to supply a "sign" that will be immediately forgotten, because



FIGURE 4. Oval Office replica in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum in Austin, Texas. Courtesy of Mary Hartneg.

“the sign aims to be the thing, to abolish the distinction of the reference, the mechanism of replacement. Not the image of the thing but its plaster cast. Its double, in other words.”³² Again, this overlaps with Li Shiqiao’s description of Chinese architectural copies:

*There is also a celebration of copies; copies of iconic traditional Chinese and Western buildings as well as formal emulations of the postmodern are common in China. In many ways, these material resurrections of famous architecture in China are probably not always perceived as “false copies”; they acquire, in their materialization, a very strong sense of the real thing. The distinction between what is authentic and what is copied becomes blurred.*³³

In these cases, both Chinese and Americans see their architecture in terms of universals instead of particulars — or rather, as *types* instead of *tokens*. America and China thus share a reconstructive mania.³⁴ Both have developed methods of producing a state of hyperreality in which imitations are seen as the “real” thing. In China, an endless process of copying is supposed to produce culture. Similarly, when analyzing American’s imitative obsessions, Eco concluded the goal is “to establish reassurance through imitation.”³⁵ This fully concurs with the Chinese situation. Both the Suzhou Pagoda and the peculiar reproduction of the Venus of Milo are samples of psycho-historical material; they are not “real” in the sense of historically transmitted material but in terms of historically transmitted ideas.

A large part of the Disney Corporation’s contemporary success has been based on exactly this insight. According

to Michael Steiner, Walt Disney realized very early on “that people prefer tidy replicas to the real thing.”³⁶ American history was a primordial subject for Disney (he dreamed of transforming the frontier into a place where people might reenact the past). And yet the original Disneyland meticulously avoided *cultural* references in its depictions of history. Instead, it inscribed these depictions into a civilizational context by “whitewashing history to reenact a sanitized, mythical version of redemption in the wilderness.”³⁷

Typically, Disney attractions today transform history into flat and unhistorical manifestations by avoiding any form of cultural concreteness. In Disney’s “Mystery Tours,” villains are battled and defeated, proving that good prevails over evil. In Frontierland, the primitive cannibals rising on the riverbanks mimic the gestures of Indians who have already been beaten.

At the EPCOT theme park, a “world showcase” uses pavilions to present eleven nations and their histories (FIG. 5). Yet, as W.F. van Wert pointed out, “The birth of the printing press is depicted [but] Gutenberg’s name is suppressed. The lack of concrete data feels deliberate.”³⁸ Likewise, the ancient Greeks are shown staging a play, but we don’t know which one. Through such devices, EPCOT’s offers a brief glimpse not into history, but into the future. We assist in a

*... contentless narrative that hurries through the centuries, names no names, offers no dates, only to rise to a crescendo at the ride’s end, revealing both the inadequacies of the past and the large corporation that is already seeing to our needs in the future, and, finally, a showroom or display to make us forgetful of the past and seduce us into the future.*³⁹

FIGURE 5. *Italy Buildings in Epcot Theme Park, Orlando, Florida. Courtesy of Thomas Grim.*



According to van Wert, it all ends with the naming of AT&T, “as though the entire history of communication were but an anticipation, some sort of pagan awaiting of this global, multinational titan god with *American* for the first name.”⁴⁰ After merely epidermal contact with history visitors are returned to the reality of American civilization, which is advertised as a utopian future. For Baudrillard, this is how Disneyland “erases time by synchronizing all the periods, all the cultures, in a single traveling motion, by juxtaposing them in a single scenario. Thus, it marks the beginning of real, punctual and unidimensional time, which is also without depth.”⁴¹

Both the above-mentioned architectural works from Suzhou and Disney attractions can be experienced as spaces where history and locality have ceased to exist. In the Chinese case, history is abstract and spaceless because it is only present in the form of texts; at Disneyland, a sanitized history appears enhanced in the form of a wonderland to be consumed instead of “authentically” experienced. What these realities have in common is that they have been artificially reduced and aestheticized to remove those ethical components some critics deem necessary to qualify them as “real.” Such critics believe that any truly historic building (even a ruin) conveys the sort of “immortality” that can reside only in a concrete artifact. No other way of preserving the afterlife of the past is accepted.

REALLY REAL VS. REALLY FAKE

What precisely distinguishes a real city from a fake city? Eco has explained that the difference between the real New Orleans and the fake one at Disneyland is that in the former,

the historical infrastructure “has remained as it was, with its low houses, its cast-iron balconies and arcades, reasonably rusted and worn, its tilting buildings that mutually support one another, like buildings you see in Paris or Amsterdam, repainted perhaps, but not too much.”⁴² Meanwhile, in the latter, authenticity is established merely in the form of a civilizational concept (FIG. 6). This means that in “real” places, authenticity installs itself in a rather complex fashion: it is produced through a critical process constantly comparing the present civilizational situation with a more historical culture, and vice versa. Disneyland and the environments it determines, on the other hand, according to Baudrillard, represent an “atemporal utopia by producing all the events, past or future, on simultaneous screens, and by inexorably mixing all the sequences as they would or will appear to a different civilization than ours.”⁴³

While in hyperreality there is no tension between history and past, a traditional Western mindset would be unhappy with creating “culture” in the Chinese sense of an absolute quality referring only to itself. Instead, it would strive to locate culture within an overall plan of (Platonic, scientific) civilization. Nor would it be satisfied with creating a Disneyland civilization that maintains no relation with real culture. It would recognize historical monuments as cultural artifacts only when they have been established through a (philosophical) discourse *as components of a civilization*.

Neither Chinese historical architecture (as is described by Leys and Mote) nor Disneyland are held to these standards. They are not concrete objects, but rather hyperreal arrangements. In the Chinese case, the sign refers to a mythical and cultural past of which the cultural sign is an integral part. It refers only to itself. At Disney attractions, the sign



FIGURE 6. *New Orleans Square in Disneyland Park, Anaheim, California.* Courtesy of Joe Penniston.

refers merely to the civilizational context *that it is supposed to establish* — which means, again, that it refers only to itself. This is why the real New Orleans eludes hyperreality while the fake one does not. Eco thus noted that the New Orleans wax museum avoids the circus feeling of cheap magic, and that “the explanatory panels have an undertone of skepticism and humor. When an episode is legendary, it is presented as such, and perhaps with the admission that it is more fun to reconstruct legend than history.”⁴⁴ Eco clearly shows that the “sense of history” — that is, the act of *critically thinking about one’s own history* — allows an escape from the temptations of hyperreality. The history of the real New Orleans is tragic, as are all histories and all acts of preservation. The real New Orleans is inscribed in a battle against time and history. The outcome will never be one-dimensional, but rather a dynamic play of living and present realities.

For the traditional point of view, “real” cities are cities that have managed to preserve their historical contexts. At the same time, some cities — Tokyo, for example — are perceived as neither real nor fake, but as *surreal*, because they are submitted to a process of hybridization that has taken place without regard to historical context.⁴⁵ It is certainly no coincidence that a non-Western city comes to mind as the prime example of such a “nonreal” place. Japanese Shintoism bears many similarities with Confucianism when it comes to the preservation of history. Still, in spite of the vast landscapes

of simulacra that it contains, Tokyo is not a hyperreal city; it evokes an uncanny kind of urban reality that is surreal and strange without being simply fake.

In hyperreality the link between fake and real is established in a completely different fashion. Disneyland is a perfect example. As in the Confucian mind, where a utopian future is derived from an idealized culture, Disney attractions suggest a utopian vision premised on the abstract principles of an ideal civilization. In this sense, Disneyland is more than a theme park. It appears as a concept whose architecture systematically supplants “authentic places” by creating abstract environments whose theme is not simply “city” but, more importantly, an optimistic vision of the future. Walt Disney suppressed this literal sense of history when he redefined New Orleans in terms of pure civilization. One contemporary report, described by Steiner, tells how Disney was convinced his reconstruction was superior to the original because it answered to higher civilizational standards. When New Orleans Square was unveiled in 1966 he was miffed by a compliment from the visiting mayor of New Orleans that it looked “just like home.” “Well,” was his reply, “it’s a lot cleaner.”⁴⁶

Within the Chinese concept of architectural authenticity there is no place for such a “sense of history” either — just as there is no space for the tragic developments of life in any hyperreality. Yet absolute unreality is offered as real presence by following a diametrically opposite approach. The sign of the Maple Bridge in Suzhou indicates a psycho-historic and poetic place that is justified through literary history. It does not signify a real existing object, and, in this sense, it is its double. For the Chinese, the Maple Bridge is real precisely because it is *not* real — that is, because it is not “merely” an item of civilization, but of Chinese culture. This is not far from the creation of a utopian form of history, of a hyperreal place that can dispense with the original. Leys thus mentioned a Ming scholar from the sixteenth century who delivered the “record” of a garden called Wuyou, which means “the Garden-that-does-not-exist.” The scholar noted that in Chinese history, “many famous gardens of the past have entirely disappeared and survive only on paper in literary descriptions. Why not skip the preliminary stage of actual existence and jump directly into the final state of literary existence which, after all, is the common end of all gardens?”⁴⁷

Walt Disney himself might have called the Chinese *cultural* reality a fantasy, but he would have claimed that the “fantasy” of Disneyland is *real* because it is *only* a part of American civilization. An anecdote has it that somebody calling Disneyland “a nice fantasy” in his presence was informed by the master that “the fantasy isn’t here.” As he continued,

*This is very real. The park is reality. The people are natural here; they’re having a good time; they’re communicating. This is what people really are. The fantasy is out there, outside the gates of Disneyland, where people have hatreds and prejudices. It’s not really real!*⁴⁸

Though both the Chinese strategy and the Disneyland approach run counter to certain common sensibilities of what is authentic and what is not, there are prominent qualities that distinguish both. Traditionally, the confusion of ethical and aesthetic categories leads to the production of kitsch — which is often the case in Disneyland, but cannot be located in Chinese architecture. In everyday language, the same constellation is expressed by saying that these buildings are “superficial.” The Chinese approach is thus opposed to the American one in that it is based not on the aesthetic proclivities of the *nouveau-riche*, who *lack* culture, but on the learning of the Confucian scholar, who has an *abundance* of culture. Still, the Chinese reality made of letters contradicts some common-sensical criteria of authenticity. Within this logic, a cultural sign must have a certain amount of “depth” — that is, it should refer to a concrete and “real” point that can be located on the time-space grid of civilization. When it comes to the perception of architecture, “historical reality” is acknowledged as a quality flowing out of the interrelationship between culture and civilization. This is why, in Eco’s words, “history will not be imitated.”⁴⁹

Defenders of both the Chinese and the “American” positions might claim that an absolute fake or any construction of hyperreality is exempt from those ethical requirements. In both cases, these requirements remain based on an unreflected conception of what is real and what is authentic. For the Chinese, anything that refers to the vast reservoir of Chinese culture is authentic enough because its relationship with this culture *makes* it authentic (just as the Japanese believe that the Ise Shrine’s authenticity is produced through its anchoring in the traditional reenactment of authentic rituals). The opposite “Disney” position would be that the authenticity of the copy is derived from its well-established place within the “real” sphere of American civilization.

Both justifications are circular, which grants them a sort of self-evident character that few logical arguments can defy. Chinese history consists of words; it settles, through a self-referential gesture, within the very cultural context that it is supposed to create. The Disney aesthetic is also justified through a circular gesture: it exists as a civilizational phenomenon taken out of any historical or cultural context, thus managing to establish its own environment. As a fiction and artifice, Disneyland justifies its existence by referring to an American civilization writ large — a civilization that it actually helped to invent.

By and large, the classical Western approach to historical perception is Platonic; it proceeds from the “fake” appearance of things to “real” historical events — or to the vestiges of the events it wants to acknowledge, and which can clearly be established in terms of authentic time and authentic space. At the root of this attitude is, of course, the ambition to overcome the erosion of time, to aggressively fight decay and the laws of nature. The Chinese have realized that such efforts are in vain. However, as mentioned, far from abandoning

history altogether, the Chinese only abandon history’s material expressions.

To a Platonic mindset, the Chinese past made of words will seem elusive because it cannot be pinned down to something real. This is exactly the problem that critics of Confucianism tend to recite. Lu Xun, for example, defined the Chinese past as a perpetually elusive enemy, as an invisible, immaterial, but indestructible, shadow or ghost. But it is important to crystallize this paradox: the fluid Chinese concept of history can also appear as progressive and flexible because it does not insist on the literal preservation of material things, and because it is not attached to history as an object. And some will point to the positive impact of the dynamism resulting from such an attitude.

EVALUATING AUTHENTICITY

Today, many people find that having the “real thing” reserves them a place outside a dull consumer society excessively governed by materialist standards for which authenticity means nothing. In modern capitalism the desire to possess something unique and “real,” which has not been mass-produced or commodified for consumption, has thus acquired elitist moral appeal. Authenticity brings with it the spiritual and aesthetic values of tradition, while imitation kills those values. However, the status of authenticity is not as homogenous as it appears to be. The purpose of the preceding reflections has not been to celebrate hyperreality of any kind, but rather to develop a critical stance toward both hyperreality and common concepts of authenticity. What is needed is a more reflected conception of what is real and what is authentic. Reality is not historical because it refers in a straightforward way to a historical fact (in which case it could still be an imitated reality or a psycho-historic fact that overlaps with the historical reality). On the contrary, any historical reality must have passed, both as a material item and as a cultural sign, through a filter of civilization.

Neither absolute fake nor the construction of hyperreality should be exempt from those ethical requirements. Thus, “Disneyland hyperreality” cannot be combated by insisting on the importance of material authenticity. It is here that the “Chinese way” of engaging abstract historical components within the concept of authenticity provides important insights. Authenticity is never a stable “material” entity; rather, in some way, all monuments are “monuments of the mind.” “Disneyfication” exaggerates the hyperreal component, and some will always argue that the traditional Chinese way of viewing history is equally exaggerated. The only constructive way of dealing with the conundrum is to engage a critical discourse between both stances — that is, to compare present civilizational situations with a more historical culture, and vice versa.

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