

Original Article

A Study on Cultural Differences between China and America from the Perspective of Traditional Architectural Culture—Taking the Examples of the Forbidden City and the White House

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Abstract - American architecture educator Robert Poisson said: "Every great piece of architecture can answer in not only function but also human mind and spirit..." Architecture is always closely associated with our life. Architecture can intuitively reflect a country's national and cultural characteristics because architecture cannot be separated from its environment. There is a great distinction in the architectural styles, concepts, and culture between Chinese and Western architecture in different periods. As a cultural symbol, architecture conveys the special cultural connotations of one country and nationality, which is worthy of our deeper study. This thesis mainly focuses on the palace buildings in architecture. Taking the Forbidden City and the White House as examples, this thesis analyzes the differences in building historical evolution, building layout, building site selection, and other characteristics between the two buildings. More importantly, we must analyze the symbolic cultural meanings reflected by different buildings through the differences in these characteristics to briefly discuss the cultural differences between China and the United States.

Keywords - Architecture, Culture, Symbolic cultural meanings, Cultural differences.

1. Introduction

Architecture has been ever called solidified music and history of stone by Goethe. For thousands of years, philosophers and poets have praised the cultural value of architecture because architecture, recognized as one of the most significant cultures, is the product of science and technology as well as the monument of human culture. Compared with other human material products, architecture has a closer and deeper association with human culture. What can account for the different cultural meanings of architecture is that it has a huge artistic capacity, strong artistic expression ability, and great inclusiveness given by the abstraction directly connected with the human mind.

From the perspective of the process of cultural formation, architecture is the synthesis of contradictions that mainly focus on two aspects: for one thing,

architecture is the accumulation and continuation of the culture of the past dynasties, and the solidified culture that can be seen by contemporary people and preserved permanently. For another, architecture is an advanced culture, which requires architects to have foresight, and all kinds of specific planning and design should leave room. Otherwise, it will cause serious consequences.

Therefore, this thesis chooses a brief analysis of the cultural difference between China and America from the perspective of traditional architectural culture as the topic, which can boost people's cultural awareness and enhance communication between different cultural categories. With the more frequent communication between countries due to the global economy, there has been an increasing demand that we should get in touch with cultural differences connected with various aspects, especially architecture.



2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Definition of Culture*

When it comes to the definition of culture, we can find that it seems to be very tough to define it accurately. At the beginning of the 20th century, many social scholars have been trying to define culture based on their professions. Nevertheless, no definition was regarded as orthodox and authoritative among what concepts they gave. On the one hand, culture refers to the combination of material and spiritual wealth created by human beings in social and historical development. On the other hand, culture refers to people's social habits and customs, which vary from nationality to nationality. As Kroeber said, it should be emphasized that culture can only be created and function in the human community, and culture encompasses all aspects of group activity, thinking, belief, cognition, and feelings that have accumulated through the long ages of social group existence and have been passed down from generation to generation (Kroeber, 1952).

Moreover, culture is regarded as the most powerful tool to analyze various beliefs, customs, and morality of different countries, thus making it vital to study culture. With the background of the global economy, it is a common phenomenon that many people from different countries have obstacles in communication due to the lack of deep recognition of different cultures. However, culture is also classified into a few categories, and this thesis mainly analyzes one of its categories: architecture culture.

2.2. *The Definition of Architecture Culture*

Wikipedia defines architecture as the process and the product of planning, designing, and constructing buildings and other physical structures.

As part of human culture, architecture culture is the comprehensive reflection of material culture, spiritual culture, system culture, and symbolic culture. Therefore, architecture culture is produced with the birth of human beings, and the development of human beings also accompanies its development, thus making it equipped with the characteristics of history, nationality, and region (Zhang, 2000). Consequently, there is no denying that analyzing the architectural culture facilitates our deeper recognition of one country, which is worthy of further study.

3. Architecture in China and the United States

Architecture culture may vary from country to country, and the distinction of architecture culture attracts many researchers to further study the architecture culture in different countries. However, architecture mainly represents a kind of culture of one country, so if we want to analyze a country's architecture, we can take some typical examples to illustrate. Therefore, this thesis chooses the Forbidden City in China and the White House in America as examples to analyze the differences in architectural culture between China and America. First, we need to analyze its fundamental characteristics to recognize what differs between China and America.

3.1. *The Characteristics of the Forbidden City*

The Forbidden City, the royal palace of the Ming and Qing Dynasties in China, is located in the center of Beijing. Three main halls cover an area of 720,000 square meters with a building area of 150,000 square meters. It includes more than 70 palaces and more than 9,000 rooms. The Forbidden City is one of the world's largest and best-preserved ancient wooden structures and was listed as a world heritage in 1987 (Taylor, 2008). This thesis mainly focuses on the four characteristics of the Forbidden City: historical evolution, architectural form, architectural layout, and its functions and values.

Firstly, in terms of historical evolution, it can be seen that people attach great importance to the concept of the unity of man and nature. To highlight the legitimacy of the political power and the supremacy of the imperial power, people are accustomed to relating the stars in the sky with the planning of the capital city. Because the feudal palace was a forbidden place in ancient times, and ordinary people were forbidden to enter it, it was called "the forbidden." It was called "the imperial city" and the outer Forbidden City in the early Ming Dynasty. During the middle and late periods of that time, it was distinguished from the outer Forbidden City; that is, the imperial city was called "the Forbidden City," and the outer forbidden city was called "the imperial city" (Li, 1997). The Forbidden City, built during the rule of Zhu Di, emperor of the Ming Dynasty, has undergone about 500 years of

history in the court, including emperor activities, hierarchy, power struggle, and religious sacrifice.

Then, when it comes to architectural form, we can find that the palace demands a grand and magnificent formation. The courtyard is also required to be open and clear to symbolize the supremacy of the feudal regime. Taihe Hall is located in the center of the diagonal of the Forbidden City, where ten auspicious beasts are on each corner. The designers of the Forbidden City think that this shows the emperor's majesty and frightens the world. However, the inner court is required to be profound and compact, thus making the six palaces in the East and the West all self-contained, each with its gate walls arranged relatively orderly. The Forbidden City is arranged along a north-south axis on which the three main halls, the back three palaces, and the imperial garden are all located. The central axis runs through the Forbidden City, reaches Yongding Gate in the south, Drum Tower and bell tower in the north, and even runs through the city (Zhang, 2011).

Thirdly, because of the architectural layout, it can be seen that the Forbidden City forms integrity through the body changes and distinctive methods, which is not only following the hierarchy of feudal society in function, but it achieves the artistic effect of left-right balance and body change. The roof formation in Chinese architecture is abundant and colorful. There are 10 kinds of various roof formations in the Forbidden City. Taking the three halls as examples, the roof of the Forbidden City is covered with colorful glazed tiles. As a complete building complex, the Forbidden City is balanced and symmetrical, where each building unfolds on a central axis from south to north.

Moreover, the center of the whole building complex is Taihe hall, which is extended from south to north. The layout of the Forbidden City extends along the North-South central axis to the east and west sides. Rhythm refers to the orderly repetition of buildings' walls, columns, doors, and windows through regular changes and arrangements to produce a kind of rhythmic beauty. On this point, architecture and music share common ground, so people call them solidified music and flowing architecture.

Finally, we should also give special attention to the functions and values of the Forbidden City. Its functions mainly lie in establishing the Palace Museum, which has

two meanings: one is to show the victory of the democratic revolution that is the fatal hit to the restoration force, and the other is to emphasize the great achievement in the history of Chinese culture and art. Besides, the values of the Forbidden City focus on two aspects: heritage values and academic values. The Forbidden City was listed as a world heritage in 1987. Some comments on the Forbidden City said: The Forbidden City has been the highest power center in China for more than five centuries, and it has become a priceless historical witness of Chinese civilization in the Ming and Qing Dynasties with its garden landscape and a large building complex which contains 9000 rooms of furniture and crafts. That the Forbidden City was listed as a world heritage deepens our recognition of the architectural values of the Forbidden City. The academic values of the Forbidden City include the architectural complex and the court culture. Especially the court culture, which is based on the royal culture, is the integrity of the emperor, power, and court. Studying the Forbidden City also can be conducive to digging out the cultural connotation and boosting our academic level to some extent.

3.2. The Characteristics of the White House

The White House is the residence and office of the president, and President Roosevelt gave its name in 1902. However, the American National Park Service possesses the White House, part of the presidential park. The White House is a white neoclassical sandstone building. It covers an area of more than 73,000 square meters and consists of the main building and the East and West wings. Because the White House is where the president lives and works. This thesis mainly studies some characteristics of the White House, such as its historical evolution, architectural layout, and architectural style of the White House.

To begin with, from the perspective of historical evolution, George Washington and his Irish architect, James Hoban, thought the president's residence should look like an English country house they got. The White House was rebuilt after the British burned it down during the War of 1812. (Clarke, 2008) To cover up the traces of the fire, the previous red walls were painted white, thus being named the White House by Roosevelt in 1814. Before the war between Britain and America, it was not called the White House but the Presidential Palace. The

United States Congress decided to establish the permanent capital employing the legislation on the Potomac River in 1790, and Washington was authorized to choose an appropriate address. After that, the French architect was appointed to make architectural plans. (Liu, 1997)

Subsequently, in terms of the architectural layout, there are mainly five rooms on the state floor through the front door: state banquet room, red room, blue room, green room, and east room from the west to the east. Among these rooms, the east room is the largest one in the White House, which can accommodate 300 guests. It is mainly used for large-scale receptions, dances, and commemorative ceremonies. The main building is 51.51m wide and 25.75m tall and has four floors. The White House is the office and residence of the president of the United States, so it has become the name of the United States government. On the ground floor are the diplomatic reception hall, library, map room, porcelain room, gold and silver room, etc.

Then, when it comes to the architectural style, we can find that George Washington has proposed some of his views on the architectural style that he thinks the White House cannot be a court and luxury the factor that he insists that it is a place where the country servants work and live. The architecture must be spacious, solid, and elegant, which gives people a sense of advance. According to what Washington said, the United States will develop rapidly, prosper, and occupy an increasingly significant status worldwide, so the construction of this architecture must be treated carefully. With a dense British architectural style, the White House becomes a worldwide and historical building, and it gradually covers an American architectural style with the management of different governors, thus making simplicity and elegance become the fundamental architectural style of the White House.

3.3. The Different Architecture between China and America

According to the above analysis of the characteristics of the Forbidden City and the White House, it is easier for us to recognize the difference in architecture between China and America.

Firstly, in terms of historical evolution, there is no

doubt that every kind of architecture has its unique history, which is exactly how they differ from each other. Then, the architectural materials are also different. Based on what has been introduced, the difference in materials between the Forbidden City and the White House is that Chinese architect prefers wood to construction. At the same time, the Americans are fond of stone materials. Besides, the architectural layout is also distinctive in that the layout in the Forbidden City has a clear direction and regular pattern that looks like a harmonious beauty. Still, the other is not confined to some traditional rules, and the layout in the United States is the formation of a square where every line seems torturous. There is still beauty in abstraction, though. Comparing some essential concepts of classical Western and traditional Chinese architecture ideas, a conclusion could be reached that classical Western architecture has paid much more attention to the category of form based on the ideas of beauty or delight.

In comparison, traditional Chinese architecture would have paid more attention to the category of meaning based on the idea of a rule which could differentiate the social ranks. (Wang, 2005) Moreover, it can be seen that when it comes to the decorations of architecture, the Forbidden City attaches great importance to colorful and luxurious decorations. At the same time, the White House may emphasize simplicity and elegance. Last, what differs most between the Forbidden City and the White House is the concepts of designers that the Forbidden City want to express the supremacy of the feudal regime. Still, the other is to convey the equality and democracy of the society.

4. The Reasons for Different Architecture Culture

Based on what this thesis has analyzed, we can see an obvious difference in architecture in China and America. However, why is there a great difference between China and America? And then this thesis will give a detailed list of reasons for this, and we will analyze its reasons respectively from the perspective of its background for the factor that a kind of architectural culture of one country is always closely connected with its background, such as politics, economy, society, etc.

4.1. The Background in China

Based on the date of the construction of the Forbidden City, China was in the Qing and Ming Dynasties. We mainly focus on its politics, economy, society, and culture that can exactly account for the designation of the Forbidden City.

To start with, because of the politics, China still was a feudal society, and the emperor had highly centralized power, making the emperor the center of this country, even though there was the germination of a capitalist system. The Forbidden City is designed to highlight the emperor's supremacy.

Then, we can find that the economy of China at that time was a small-scale peasant economy, which still occupied a dominant position in the Chinese economy. The small-scale economy leads to the lack of advanced technology and method, thus narrowing the choices of architectural materials.

And then, when it comes to society in China, there have been some internal and external wars in which people protected their legal rights and protested the feudal regime to trigger the internal war. Some foreigners are desirable to invade China and seize the territory to cause external wars, which led to an unstable society and could not provide a beneficial environment for the construction of the Forbidden City.

Last but not least, China's culture at that time played a great role in the construction. Confucianism was deep-rooted, and people then emphasized introverted and implicit thoughts and attached great importance to the unity of people and nature, which is exactly reflected in the architectural layout. According to the analysis, the architecture is always encircled by the wall. The architectural structure is full of clear and regular directions, illustrating the people's concepts at that time.

4.2. The Background in America

Different from the politics of China, America had never experienced a feudal society, so the construction of the White House was not to serve the governor but the whole country. When the White House was built, America won the independence war. It established the democratic republic system compared with China, which is why the White House is designed as the office and residence of the

president. Moreover, the president is only the person who works for the country instead of possessing centralized power, thus filling the White House with democracy.

From the perspective of the economy, the economy in America was capitalist. It was at a time when the first industrial revolution was in progress, which was conducive to the emergence of advanced technology and methods. Therefore, it is normal for Americans to choose advanced architectural materials and stones to make the construction structure more solid.

As to the culture in America, the enlightenment has released people's minds, and people are open and seek freedom and liberation. During this period, people all emphasized the open mind and freedom and liberation of humanism, which reflected exactly on the concepts of the architectural layout. Therefore, compared with the surroundings of walls in China, the architectural layout in America prefers an abstract construction and spacious, open, and clear structure that expresses the different concepts of architecture. Their open and abstract mind makes it easier for people to understand why their construction is full of simplicity and elegance.

5. The Different Culture Symbolic Meanings and Cultural Differences

According to what I have analyzed above, it can be seen that different architecture has different backgrounds and connotations and reflects different cultures, even the cultural symbolic meaning. However, what is the cultural symbolic meaning? In literature, one thing is sometimes used to symbolize the other to obtain the cultural symbolic meaning, so it is a kind of figure of speech. A kind of architecture is by no means itself; it is more functions lie in its symbolic meanings. For example, there are so many buildings in America that are used to refer to other things. The Pentagon in America symbolizes the American Department of Defense; the Wall Street in America symbolizes the American Financial Circles; the Capitol Hill in the United States refers to the American Congress; the Hollywood in the United States symbolizes the American Film-making Industry; the Madison Avenue in the United States refers to the American advertising industry, etc. When we study a kind of architecture, we cannot ignore the implicit cultural meanings. Of course,

the symbolic meaning differs most in architecture, so this section mainly analyzes the difference between symbolic cultural meanings and cultural differences.

5.1. The Different Culture Symbolic Meanings

To begin with, based on the characteristics and reasons of the Forbidden City, the construction of the Forbidden City is fully following the supremacy of the feudal regime, which can reflect in the decorations, layout, styles, and concepts of the Forbidden City. As to the decorations of the Forbidden City, we can find that it was decorated with colorful tiles, and the whole building looks luxurious and magnificent only because it was where the emperor lived and worked. We can also take its historical evolution as an example, and we can find the designer of the Forbidden City compares the capital city with the stars in the sky, thus giving the name to the architecture and the emperor's power is justified by nature to highlight the supremacy of the feudal monarch. Even the designer of the Forbidden City has always stated that this court mainly serves the emperor, and the ordinary cannot enter the court without the monarch's permission, which exactly accounts for the name of this architecture. According to what has been analyzed, it is easier for us to take a deep insight into the symbolic meanings that at that period, the construction of the Forbidden City was the symbolization of the supremacy of the feudal regime and mainly served the politics at that time.

However, the White House usually symbolizes the American Government. Unlike the symbolic cultural meanings in China, the American government is not a person. The United States had never undergone a feudal society and established the democratic republic system since it won the independence war. The mainstream mind of the democratic republic system is that the president in America cannot master absolute power and cannot decide anything by himself, and must discuss with other members of Congress to guarantee the democracy of the politics. Moreover, during that period, the Americans accepted the new idea brought by the enlightenment, which widened their horizons. This is why the designer of the White House says that this architecture is constructed for the servants who work and serve the country instead of a certain person. Generally speaking, the White House

symbolizes democracy, equality, freedom, and liberation, which fully complies with the history and reality of the United States at that period.

5.2. The Cultural Differences in China and America

We study a kind of architecture not only to recognize its fundamental formation, layout, and historical evolution but its cultural differences. In fact, from the perspective of the architectural difference, we can see the cultural difference, so this section mainly talks about the cultural differences based on the different architecture in China and America.

To start with, because of the architecture's decorations, the Chinese may emphasize the application of color, and they are inclined to associate color with hierarchy and comply with the pecking order, reflecting the feudal society's feudal mind. However, Americans choose the color they love to decorate their architecture and choose different colors to avoid the monotony of color, expressing their personalities that they do everything without limitations and have their thoughts. Then, as to the architectural layout, we can see that the Chinese attach more importance to the integrity of layout and advocate the unity of the human and nature, while the Americans emphasize the independence of every space. In terms of the architectural style, we can find that human in China is more modest and implicit and prefers to observe the traditional rules, and lacks the ability and consciousness of creativity that traditional Confucianism influences them. Still, Americans are willing to break the tradition, do well in innovation, and are open and outgoing. Just as the communication between Chinese and Americans tells us, the Chinese always love to greet others through constant phatic communion. Still, Americans prefer to greet others through an intimate movement to show respect.

Moreover, when people in China are praised for certain achievements, they are usually modest in responding, while Americans prefer to accept compliments without hesitation. Like the construction, China chooses to use walls to encircle all rooms and emphasize the beauty of symmetry. At the same time, the Americans are fond of making their buildings more open and spacious to form the architectural square. Besides, the Chinese are more rational and have a sense of depth, but Americans seem

abstract and have a sense of art. Taking architecture as an example, the buildings in China have a clear direction and are easily seen in the structure of constructions.

In contrast, the architecture in the United States is more abstract. For example, in our daily life, the Chinese are accustomed to doing everything with reiterative thinking and have sufficient reason to do one thing. At the same time, the Americans seem to do everything, which puts people at a loss, and it does not seem easy to understand their way of life.

6. Conclusion

According to the definition, characteristics, reasons, symbolic cultural meanings, and the cultural difference between the architecture in China and America, we have come to realize there is still a great cultural difference between China and America. Taking the Forbidden City and the White House as an example, this thesis mainly analyzes the symbolic cultural meanings. It summarizes the cultural differences between China and America by listing the different characteristics of architecture and the reasons for the differences. Taking the layout, designation, style, and even values as an example, architecture can reflect a kind of culture. After all, the architecture culture belongs to the culture, for the culture has been classified

into several categories, thus making the study of the architecture culture so crucial.

Meanwhile, the architectural culture reflects one nationality's beliefs, ideas, customs, and ways of life. As we know, different culture causes many problems in cross-cultural communication with the background of the global economy. Every kind of culture has its merits and defaults, so we cannot ignore other countries' cultures and make the best of its advanced culture and modify its defaults, which is beneficial to our cultural development. Therefore, we cannot judge the culture employing our subjective emotions but objective functions. Moreover, realizing one kind of culture can facilitate our cooperation with other countries to avoid obstacles in communication. Generally speaking, when we study an architectural culture in China and America, we experience the fusion of different cultures that is extremely conducive to our further foreign language study.

In conclusion, I firmly believe that after reading this thesis, every reader not only can take a deeper insight into the different architecture in America and China but can discover the cultural differences hidden in the traditional architecture, which is beneficial to their improvement of language learning as well as the further study on the architecture.

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