Chinese Heritage in the Making

Svensson, Marina, Maags, Christina

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Svensson, Marina and Christina Maags.
Amsterdam University Press, 2018.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66493.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66493
From a Symbol of Imperialistic Penetration to a Site of Cultural Heritage

The ‘Italian-Style Exotic District’ in Tianjin

Hong Zhang

Maags, Christina & Marina Svensson (eds), Chinese Heritage in the Making: Experiences, Negotiations and Contestations. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018
DOI 10.5117/9789462983694/CH03

Abstract

The chapter focuses on the former Italian concession in Tianjin, which during the Mao Zedong era was interpreted as a humiliating example of imperialism on China but has now become a symbol of the city’s cosmopolitan heritage. The ‘Italian-style exotic district’, its new name, is branded as reflecting authentic Italian architecture despite the fact that it contains reconstructed new buildings. The area has been re-evaluated as a result of ideological changes and economic reforms. The colonial legacy is now a valuable asset for Tianjin in its city branding, and the stories told are no longer that of imperialism and humiliation but of modernity, cosmopolitanism, and friendship with Italy and other foreign countries.

Keywords: Italian concession, Tianjin, colonial legacy, city branding

In recent years, in response to the changing political, cultural, and economic situation in China, and in line with a shift in heritage policies, the Tianjin municipal government has come to view the former concessions within the city, along with their foreign-style architecture, as valuable cultural and architectural heritage. The buildings and gardens in the former concessions, once viewed as a symbol of imperialistic incursion into China, are today looked upon as architectural heritage, tourist attractions, and economic opportunities, and have received official patronage and heritage status (similar new interpretations have been made with respect to ethnic heritage
and heritage associated with the Republican period as discussed by Cooke in this volume). The fact that Tianjin was once forced open to foreign powers and became a treaty port has been turned into a celebratory point by local officials and is now seen as a strong indication of the city’s long-standing struggle for modernization and internationalization. Tianjin, which has also been in economic eclipse, overshadowed by cities such as Shenzhen, Guangdong, Shanghai, and Chongqing during the reform era, is now eager to uncover a way to ‘sell’ itself. The local authorities therefore claim that the foreign-style architecture has added more international flavour and status, architectural diversity, as well as cultural variation to Tianjin.

This chapter looks specifically at the former Italian concession in Tianjin, which has received special official attention and extensive architectural reconstruction. It explores its transformation into a cultural symbol of Tianjin and examines the reasons behind the official reconfiguration of Tianjin’s former colonial site into a rediscovered and reinvented cultural heritage site of the city. Around 2000, the Tianjin municipal government, together with the government of the Hebei District where the former Italian concession was located, decided to launch a massive urban project to reconstruct and renovate the concession. Renamed ‘Italian-Style Exotic District’ or ‘Italian-Style Town’, as inscribed in English on a tablet displayed at the entrance, it is now showcased as an emblem of the city’s historical openness. Indicative of not only the city’s cultural diversity but also of its unique identity, the new flamboyant name for the former concession intentionally eradicates the area’s association with its colonial past, along with the historical humiliation and imperialist domination. The use of the term *fengqing* (exotic) in the renovated Italian section’s Chinese name *Yishi fengqingqu* (Italian-Style Exotic District) is also intriguing in that it evokes a sense of the exotic and the novel. In a way, it appears to voluntarily impose Edward Said’s orientalism to the newly reconstructed site, only this time it is the foreign that appears fantastic and mysterious in the middle of the Chinese scene (Said 1978: 94). The Italian section is thus ‘colourful and exotic’. As Shirley Ann Smith puts it, ‘The Sino-Italian collaboration will re-create the memory or the reflection of Italian Tianjin in an enhanced contemporary version, perhaps more tasteful than Caesar’s Palace or The Venetian Resort in Las Vegas. The ‘real’ new Italian concession will be doubtless better than the old. Tourists (Chinese and Europeans) will be able to fulfil their own projected images in the new reality’ (Smith 2012: 156).

A careful study of the renewed importance and reinvented status of the former colonial concessions in Tianjin can further illustrate the fluctuating political and cultural ethos in the post-Mao state. Focusing on the fluid
official views towards the former concessions and on the revitalized cultural and economic importance attached to foreign architecture within the former concessions in Tianjin, the chapter examines the local authorities’ new definition of cultural assets and heritage and its new-found interest in what were once reckoned as imperialistic relics and products.

Historical background

The modern city of Tianjin has evolved with multilayers of culture and economy embedded in its diverse landscape. Its unique features are rooted in its geographical location, internal stimuli, and external pressure, which made possible its eventual political and economic ascendance in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Located about 120 kilometres southeast of the national capital, the city of Tianjin, historically known as the Gateway (men hu) to Beijing, is one of four centrally administered province-level municipalities in China and the second largest city in north China today. The city has a long history. It has borne different names, from
Zhigu Village to Haijin Town, before assuming its current name, which means ‘heavenly ford’. During the early Ming dynasty, Zhu Di, Prince of Yan, forded the rivers there to embark upon an epic power struggle with his nephew, the then Ming emperor, for the imperial throne. Having won the war, Zhu Di, the new Yongle Emperor, designated the name ‘Tianjin’ to the city, indicating a place where the Son of Heaven had made the crossing. The Yongle Emperor proceeded to set up several guard stations in Tianjin, adding a military population of 16,800 to the city. Therefore, Tianjin was often referred to as Tianjin Garrison (Wei) (Bun 2001: 14-15).

Tianjin's physical features played an important role in the development of the city. Its proximity to the political centre of Beijing, its complex river system, and its status as a port city all featured prominently in its eventual rise to pre-eminence. Being at the northern end of the Grand Canal, the city had for centuries functioned as an important conduit for the transhipment of foodstuffs from south and central China up the canal to the capital of Beijing and to other places in north China. Situated about 35 miles from the head of the Gulf of Bohai, Tianjin provided the nearest sea outlet for ocean-going ships and was a leading port in northern China. With the exception of the Yellow River, the most important waterways of north China were centred in Tianjin. Nine rivers converged there to form the Hai River, the most famous river that runs through the city. The Hai River nourished the city and witnessed its growth. It meanders into the estuary of the sea. Tianjin was also the closest point where foreign ocean-going ships could approach the Qing capital of Beijing. The economically convenient location turned the city into a major commercial centre in north China that served Beijing and places beyond.

Despite its location as a hub of the water transport network and despite the active commercial activities the city had experienced, Tianjin only rose to political and economic prominence just over a hundred years ago, during the late nineteenth century. Its rise was closely related to the political turbulence and outside impetus that took place in China in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Treaty of Nanjing (1842), which concluded the Opium War between China and Great Britain, ushered in a new era for imperial China and forced open a number of Chinese coastal cities as treaty ports for foreign residence and enterprises, among other terms. The Convention of Peking of 1860, which concluded the Second Opium War fought between China and Anglo-French powers in 1856-1860, sealed the fate of Tianjin and turned it into a treaty port and opened it up to foreign consulates and entrepreneurs. Great Britain, France, and the United States were the first Western powers to obtain concessions in Tianjin. Following
China’s humiliating defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, Germany and Japan extracted concessions from the city. The suppression of the anti-foreign, anti-Christian Boxer Movement by the International Expeditionary Force of eight countries in 1900 witnessed the establishment of Russian, Italian, Belgian, and Austro-Hungarian concessions in Tianjin. Thus, between 1860 and 1902, nine foreign powers established concessions in the city and transformed it into the largest treaty port in the north and the second largest in China. A relative latecomer to the treaty port system, Tianjin nevertheless turned out to be an ultimate treaty port (Rogaski 1999: 30).

**Foreign concessions in Tianjin**

The concessions were essentially leased foreign enclaves called ‘renting zones’ or zujie within Chinese cities, but they were not subject to Chinese jurisdiction and enjoyed special privileges. In other words, they functioned like foreign territories within a Chinese city, and the ultimate authority within a concession rested on its resident consul.

The arrival and the extended stay of a small yet significant group of foreigners added a crucial new dimension to the cultural, political, and economic landscape of Tianjin. Meanwhile, imperialist incursions in the aftermath of the First and Second Opium Wars and the devastating large-scale domestic rebellion known as the Taiping Movement forced the Qing government to respond to the severe challenges to the state. The ensuing Self-Strengthening Movement, also known as the Foreign Affairs Movement, represented the first serious official endeavour to learn from the West in order to deal more effectively with the threat the Western powers posed. A number of prominent pro-reform Qing officials were appointed as governor-generals of Zhili (now Hebei) Province centred in Tianjin. These officials carried out significant infrastructural reforms in the city and turned it into the focus of their modernization enterprises. For example, the city became the forerunner of modernization reforms with the appointment of the famous Qing official Li Hongzhang as governor-general of Zhili in 1870, a position that Li retained for the next 25 years. At the time of Li’s appointment, the Self-Strengthening Movement in the form of adopting foreign military technology became acceptable to the rulers in Beijing, and Li turned Tianjin into the centre of his experiments in north China and launched a number of major projects, including the construction of the first and largest military factory in north China – the Tianjin Machine Factory – and the development of a variety of industrial
enterprises (Hershatter 1986: 29). Therefore, Tianjin of the late Qing dynasty was not merely a passive recipient of foreign penetration and treaty port systems, but figured prominently in China's modernization efforts and could proudly claim a number of ‘firsts’ in modern Chinese history: The first railway built by the Chinese – the track between Tianjin and Tangshan; the first modern postal service, as well as the first set of stamps – the dragon stamps; the first newspaper – *Dagong Bao*; and the first mint, etc. (Luo 2005: 29-40). Because of its status as a treaty port and its physical proximity to Beijing, Tianjin enjoyed great official attention and presence. In the context of foreign concessions and Chinese official initiatives, Tianjin assumed new political and economic significance and was transformed into a city spearheading the quest for modernization in north China.

The coexistence of foreign powers’ presence and activities with internal modernization ventures, along with the interaction between the two, forged a new identity for Tianjin. The juxtaposition of Western and Chinese residents helped to create a unique city with both strong foreign flavours and indigenous cultural identity. The combined efforts moved Tianjin out of the shadow of Beijing and turned it into a pillar of modernity and into a city that was more modern in its facilities and infrastructure than the capital of Beijing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As the first country to open a concession in Tianjin, Great Britain extracted the largest zone on the south bank of the Hai River. France and the United States soon followed the British lead and set up concessions on the same side of the river. After the conclusion of the Sino-Japanese War, Japan and Germany also established concessions in Tianjin, with the German concession next to the American one and the Japanese concession adjacent to the French one, creating a two-mile-long foreign settlement along the south bank of the river (Rogaski 1999: 34). The crushing of the Boxer Uprising in 1900 by the International Expeditionary Force of eight countries led to the landing of over 20,000 soldiers in Tianjin. In the aftermath of the suppression of the Boxer Uprising, foreign states were able to wield more power and influence by either expanding existing concessions or demanding new concessions in Tianjin. Between 1900 and 1902 an international commission, known as the Tianjin provisional government (*Dutong yamen*), was in control of the city. Under this foreign administration, the walls surrounding the older part of the city were demolished while various public works projects were completed (‘Old Tientsin, New Tianjin’ 2015). Russia, Italy, and Austria-Hungary, the countries that participated militarily in the suppression of the Boxer Uprising, were able to obtain
concessions on the north bank of the Hai River.' Belgium, although not physically part of the expedition, managed to gain a concession south of the Russian one. In 1902, the United States gave up its concession to Great Britain, but still maintained a military garrison there. The juxtaposition of foreign-controlled concessions turned Tianjin into a so-called 'hyper-colony' (Rogaski 1999: 34).

The cluster of concessions adjacent to one another created a situation unique to Tianjin. The main avenue following the zigzag of the Hai River cut through several concessions, thus travelling down the avenue could be a surreal experience. The account by John Hersey, who was born in Tianjin and spent his early years there with his missionary parents, probably provides the most vivid description: ‘What a weird city I grew up in. For three or four Chinese coppers, I could ride in a rickshaw from my home, in England, to Italy, Germany, Japan, or Belgium. I walked to France for violin lessons; I had to cross the river to get to Russia, and often did, because the Russians had a beautiful wooded park with a lake in it’ (Western 1985: 344). An American soldier of the 15th Infantry Regiment stationed in Tianjin illustrates the distinctive amalgamation of foreign nationals in the concessions this way: ‘In one block one may see an Englishman, a Frenchman, and an Italian soldier, a dozen Japanese soldiers, a Jewish drummer, an American expatriate, and a Russian […] of the lower class and a Capuchin Monk’ (Zhang and Liu 2013: 99). Foreign expatriates in Tianjin longed to create in the concessions a replica as close as possible to their home country. Hence, they often named the roads within their concession after the famous landmarks and personages of their own country. Accordingly, the name of a main street traversing different concessions would change from ‘Rue de France’ in the French concession to ‘Victoria Road’ upon entering the British concession, and then to ‘Kaiser Wilhelmstrasse’ in the German concession (Zhang and Liu 2013: 90). In 1890, the completed Commerce Building within the British concession was named Gordon Hall, after the British officer Charles ‘Chinese’ Gordon, who distinguished himself as the leading officer of the ‘Ever Victorious Army’ in the suppression of the Taiping Movement and who also laid out architectural plans for the British concession. In 1897, a newly built road within the British concession was named Gordon Road (Baike.baidu.com 2016).

1 When World War I ended, Germany and Austria-Hungary lost their concessions in Tianjin.
2 The American concession was small in the beginning. In 1880 it was placed under Chinese jurisdiction. Then in 1902 the British took it over and made it part of the British concession. However, the United States maintained a permanent garrison in Tianjin until Pearl Harbor.
England, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Austria-Hungary, Russia, the United States, and Japan all held concession territory in Tianjin at one time or another, and all except for the United States designed their sections based on their home country’s architectural style. The proliferation of concessions changed the landscape of Tianjin, and the banks of the Hai River were dotted with a diversity of architectural styles of eight countries, referred to as ‘a European architectural enclave’ by a contemporary architectural historian (Lewis 2003: 84) or ‘a Disneyland-like exhibition of world architecture and design’ by another scholar (Rogaski 1999: 34). As historian Maurizio Marinelli puts it, ‘Each concession developed its residential area for the expatriates of the colonial power (and in some cases for wealthy Chinese citizens), using building styles that were reflecting, reproducing and imposing the stylistic traditions of each individual country’ (Marinelli 2007: 137). Foreign powers also established modern facilities within their concessions, complete with drainage, lighting, schools, hospitals, a police force, prisons, and barracks (Lieberthal 1980: 3; Lewis 2003: 84). With trade as their top priority, foreign entrepreneurs transformed rural districts on both banks of the Hai River into a flourishing economic centre. Meanwhile, the rise of the new economic hub also led to the corresponding economic decline of the old commercial centre in the old city located south of the foreign concessions.

In the aftermath of the Boxer Uprising, foreign powers gained the right to set up barracks in the concessions in accordance with the Boxer Protocol and turned Tianjin into a city with the largest number of foreign soldiers in China. With the exception of Austria-Hungary, eight foreign powers established headquarters in Tianjin for their troops in China (Zhang and Liu 2013: 99). Consequently, foreign soldiers of different nationalities could often be seen in Tianjin, a further testament to the deep penetration of foreign powers into China. As scholar John Western claims, ‘Garrisons and drill groups have ever been a fundamental facet of the morphology of the colonial city. They stand for its ultimate explanation and the ultimate sanction of the colonial system’ (Western 1985: 342). Even though both Chinese and foreigners could own or lease property and reside inside the concessions, foreign military barracks served as a powerful symbol of imperialist infiltration into China and as an ever-present reminder of the political and military impotence of the Qing government.

The concession area of eight countries was large in size, far surpassing that of the old city of Tianjin. Members of the Chinese new commercial middle class, attracted by the relative security, quietness, and modern facilities
in the concessions, also made their homes there. In the wake of the 1911 Revolution which ended the Qing dynasty, many former Qing officials and members of the imperial family chose to live in Tianjin and built villas in the concession area. During the chaotic warlord period, a number of resigned or retired political or military leaders also established residence within the concessions. The newly-built villas no longer followed exclusively the foreign styles, but adopted a combination of Western and Chinese designs, leading to the appearance of a new hybrid style of architecture, which added further to the architectural diversity in Tianjin. Over 800 buildings of foreign styles, known as *xiao yang lou* (small foreign villas), have survived to this day, providing a unique outlook over the most prosperous region of the city (Luo 2005: 168).

The Italian concession in Tianjin (1901-1947) was the only Italian representation of colonialism, not only in China, but also in Asia. In 1901, after signing the leasing contract with the Chinese government, Italy acquired 771 *mu* (or 447,647 square metres) situated between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian concessions, making the Italian concession one of the smallest among the concessions in Tianjin. The only concession that was even smaller was the Belgian concession, with 747.5 *mu* of land (Tianjin Haihe Yishifengqingqu Guanweihui n.d.: 19). As a late addition to the group of concessions in Tianjin, the Italian concession had a rather bumpy start since the area contained a lot of low-level wetland, a cemetery, and a large number of lower-class Chinese, mainly salt labourers. The drainage and the levelling of the wetland and the removal of the cemetery and the Chinese population within the area required a substantial amount of financial resources and human effort. The Italian Consul General, Vincenzo Fileti, a lieutenant who participated in the Italian expedition against the Boxers and who served as Consul General of the Italian concession from 1909 to 1919, played a key role in securing funds and transforming the Italian concession into a ‘success’ story. The building construction within the concession followed a strict building code by exclusively producing Italian-style buildings while eliminating all indications of anything Chinese (Marinelli 2007: 134). Also, Fileti was known to insist that the blueprints for buildings within the concession be adopted once only, thus ensuring that the buildings were of varied styles (Shang 2008: 135). After about 20 years of effort, the concession was dotted with a diversity of Italian architecture which has remained the basis of the reconstructed ‘Italian-Style Exotic District’ today, although some later buildings also reflected the architectural styles of other European countries. Furthermore, after many well-known and wealthy Chinese
moved into the Italian section, some villas with both Italian and Chinese styles started to emerge.\(^3\)

The Italian concession was not really a profit-making enterprise, thus the financial resources derived from properties within the concession was key to its self-sustaining operation. One scholar explains the inconsequential economic value of the Italian concession this way: ‘The Italian China trade was negligible at the time. Shortly after the acquisition of the Tianjin concession in 1901, it was all but forgotten by the administration in Rome. In time, it became a “far-away sentinel of the Italian civilization”, as Mussolini phrased it pathetically later, and lost all but symbolic purpose of Italian policy makers’ (Urosevic 2013: 1070). Nevertheless, it was this small and seemingly insignificant former Italian concession that has gained special official recognition and has been transformed into one of Tianjin’s most important cultural and historical symbols today.

**The fate of former concessions in Tianjin**

The German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian concessions came to an end soon after the end of World War I, while the Belgium government returned its concession to the Chinese government in 1931 since it was not making a profit and thus served little economic purpose. The rest of the concessions were returned to China when or soon after World War II ended. When the CCP came to power in 1949, it proceeded to obliterate new China’s link with its colonial/imperialist past. From its formation in 1921, the CCP had espoused the ideology of anti-imperialism, which targeted Japan during China’s war with Japan and the United States during the Civil War. National Communists at heart, Mao Zedong and his followers were acutely conscious of China’s humiliations of the past century. With the unfolding of the Communist victory in China, the CCP leaders, especially Mao Zedong, laid out general principles regarding the new government’s foreign policy. Eager to restore national confidence and to assert China’s independence, the Communist leadership intended to make clear its difference from the previous supine Manchu and Nationalist regimes and to end the privileges enjoyed by the foreign powers in China. The issues of equality and mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty functioned as the fundamental principles in defining new China’s relationship with the rest of the world (Zhang 2002: 151). Domestically, besides launching anti-imperialist rhetoric

\(^3\) For a more detailed description of the construction process, see Marinelli 2011: 80-109.
and slogans, in Tianjin as well as elsewhere in treaty ports, a most tangible way of erasing the city’s association with its humiliating past was through name changing. Thus, Rue de France in the French concession was changed to Liberation Road and Victoria Road and Victoria Park in the former British concession assumed the new names of North Liberation Road and North Liberation Park, respectively.

On the other hand, ideology, however powerful, can still be subject to practicality. It would make little sense to tear down the well-constructed buildings, which soon functioned as the offices of various local government agencies and provided shelter for Chinese in need. When John Hersey visited his birthplace in the 1980s, he found the house he grew up in was occupied by seven households. Nevertheless, during the early years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when anti-imperialist/bourgeois rhetoric and actions reached its peak, architecture with more glaring foreign symbols in the former concessions became primary targets of young Red Guards. For example, some Red Guards climbed to the top of St Joseph Cathedral (known in Chinese as Xikai Church) in the former French concession, the largest Roman Catholic Church in Tianjin, established in 1916, in an attempt to destroy the bronze crosses on top of the three prominent-looking domes. In addition, in their ensuing attack on the cathedral, Red Guards proceeded to destroy the cathedral's domes. The church sustained more damage as a result of the Tangshan earthquake of 1976. Repairs and renovation to the cathedral began in 1979, a few years after the Cultural Revolution came to an end. The church was officially opened to the public in 1980 and has resumed regular religious activities since then. In 1991, this large Catholic Church was added to both the Tianjin cultural relics protection list and the historical-style architecture special protection sites list ('Xikai Church' 2016).

Kiessling Restaurant, the first Western restaurant in Tianjin, had been able to keep its original name even after it became a state-owned restaurant in the 1950s because of the decades-long fame it had enjoyed. However, this prominent Western-sounding name, apparently associated with Western/imperialist infiltration into Tianjin in the eyes of revolutionaries, was immediately singled out during the violent years of the Cultural Revolution and was renamed Workers-Peasants-Soldiers Cafeteria. It was not until some long-standing employees of the restaurant successfully petitioned Premier Zhou Enlai in the politically more moderate years of the early 1970s that the crude name was changed back to its original one. In a similar vein, the Five Great Avenues (wudadao), occupying the most important part of the former British concession area, also suffered much damage during
the Cultural Revolution when Red Guards raided one residential house after another searching for anything bourgeois. Having raided a residential building, they would place a red flag on its rooftop indicating its occupation by revolutionaries. The residents would then be driven out (Feng 1999: 11).

In the 1980s, when the potent authoritarianism of the Maoist era started to recede and China was opening up to Western influence, patriotic education remained an important political theme. Consequently, Tianjin local theatres still put on plays that reveal strong anti-imperialist sentiments. One such play was called ‘Burning Down the Wanghailou Church’. The play centres on the anti-missionary riots and the burning of the Wanghailou Church, a Catholic church run by the French missionaries in the former French concession, by the people of Tianjin, whose outbursts of anger and action were ignited by the alleged mistreatment of Chinese orphans by French missionaries and by the shooting of a Chinese official clerk by the French consul in 1870 (Schoppa 2011: 63-64).

Under the continuing influence of the revolutionary rhetoric, Chinese writings published in the 1980s and 1990s in relation to the former concessions in Tianjin were often quick to point out the debilitating effects of the former concessions on Tianjin, focusing on topics such as their infringement of Chinese sovereignty, their privileged status under extraterritoriality, their control of the Chinese economy, and their sinful environs for smuggling, opium dens, and brothels (Wan 2013). As one scholar from Tianjin typically argues, the former concessions were a ‘glaring symbol of the semi-colonial status of Tianjin and a manifestation of foreign imperialists’ attempt to divide China’. Thus, ‘the humiliation and oppression that modern Tianjin once experienced have been deeply implanted in the memory of the people of Tianjin and will never be forgotten’. He further claims in a sensational tone that the former foreign concessions had not only served as the breeding ground for foreign imperialists’ running dogs and slaves but also acted as a hiding place for displaced Qing nobles, warlords, and bureaucrats in their conspiracy to divide and control China (Yang 1994: 39-40). Along these lines, many writings published in the immediate years following the Cultural Revolution continued to describe the concessions in a negative light.

Shifting perceptions and the reconstructed former Italian concession

During the last few decades, China has transformed itself from an isolated nation with a rigid command economy into a free market economy closely
integrated with the global economy. China's economic reform and increasing openness in the decades following the end of the Cultural Revolution and the Mao era have brought about far-reaching political, cultural, and social changes in the country. Post-Mao China largely represents a repudiation of the value system, political stance, and cultural symbols exemplified during the peak years of Maoist China. The pace of change has quickened significantly in the aftermath of China's then paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's southern tour in 1992, which marked a watershed not only in China's market reform but also in its cultural transformation (Zhang 2013: 168).

The end of the Mao era, along with the demise of Marxist ideology, has compelled the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to seek new moral ground for political legitimization. As Richard Madsen claims, the CCP no longer even pretends to uphold communism, but seeks to gain legitimacy through new channels such as reviving the Confucian notion of social harmony and stability, and projecting itself as the guardian of China's intangible and tangible cultural heritage (Madsen 2014: 58). Similarly, in the new ideological and cultural contexts, virulent anti-imperialist rhetoric of the revolutionary era has vanished, while relics from China's semi-colonial past, manifested vividly through the existing foreign architecture in the former foreign concessions in port cities, have assumed new importance: in recent decades, many have been renovated to represent China's diverse cultural heritage. Consequently, reconciling the CCP's relatively recent anti-imperialist outcry with its contemporary celebration of the physical display of former imperialistic penetration into China often presents a contested, paradoxical, and ambiguous area. As Madsen posits, ‘it is no simple task then to fashion a new vision of the Chinese nation by drawing upon its cultural heritage. The heritage generates many contradictory meanings that can as easily intensify as overcome the built-in political and economic contradictions of a hybrid “socialist market economy”’ (Madsen 2014: 69).

In his book on museum studies, Kirk Denton underscores the idea that history is subject to reinterpretation and reinvention by investigating how the ‘representations of the past are changing in the new political and economic climates of postsocialist, neoliberal China’ (Denton 2014: 9). To seek political hegemony, the CCP continues to render itself in a way that marks its rise to power and continuation in power inevitable (Denton 2014: 9). Similar to the shifting representation in museums and memorial sites, changing official perceptions on the former colonial concessions in China's treaty ports also function as a ‘particularly visible and public space through which to discuss issues of memory, politicized constructions of the past,
globalization’ (Denton 2014: 9) and a reconstruction of national and local identities.

However, in the craze to modernize China in the era of economic reform, the Chinese government has also been keen to fill cities with skyscrapers and demolish old architecture deemed to diminish the cities’ modern appearances. In the process, a number of old buildings with intrinsic historical value have either been obliterated or faced the threat of disappearance (compare Cui’s discussion on developments in Datong and Grazer Bideau and Yan on Beijing in this volume). Furthermore, the central government has increasingly delegated financial responsibility and designation of cultural sites to local authorities. Therefore, it is often at the latter’s discretion to make critical decisions regarding whether historical sites deserve conservation, preservation, renovation, and promotion, or demolition. In the case of the city of Tianjin, the local officials have authorized the destruction of a number of age-old neighbourhoods and districts of historical value, such as the old urban district known as Southern City or Nanshi. These actions on the part of the local government have been met with serious concerns and even verbal protests from people conscious about the conservation of historical sites. For example, the famous writer Feng Jicai, a native of Tianjin, has been a strong advocate for preserving traditional culture and conserving old districts of Tianjin and has long been vocal in protesting against the demolition of historical architecture and settlements of long tradition, in an effort to protect and rescue Tianjin’s historical houses (Zhang 2001: 56).

Feng claims that a good number of these old buildings were not merely old houses, but were ‘vehicles for traditional culture. If you regard a city as having a spirit, you will respect it, safeguard it, and cherish it. If you regard it as only matter, you will use it excessively, transform it at will, and damage it without regret’ (Wheeler 2004).4

Meanwhile, within the context of globalization, city branding, commercialization, and tourism promotion, the Tianjin municipal government promotes especially the city’s former concessions with their foreign-looking architecture as they not only add exotic colour, distinctness, and diversity to the city, but also boost tourism and commercial ventures. As one scholar states, globalizing forces ‘inherent in the shift from production to consumption are influencing changes in the built environment and in their local cultures. This is most acute in places of heritage value where the local culture with its built heritage is being transformed into a product for tourist consumption.’ Consequently, ‘traditional historic places are undergoing a

---

4 For an in-depth discussion of Feng’s efforts to preserve historical buildings, see Hua 2001.
redefinition and reinterpretation of their cultural heritage in order to be competitive and attractive’ (Nasser 2003: 467). In this new milieu, a conflict exists ‘between preserving the past for its intrinsic value and the need for development in response to changing societal values’ (Nasser 2003: 467). The local government has singled out the former concession sites, especially the relatively well-kept Italian concession and the British concession areas, for special investment and renovation. The two famous historical sites among others in Tianjin, known as the Italian-Style Exotic District (Yishifengqingqu) located largely in the former Italian concession and the Five Great Avenues (Wudadao) situated in the former British concession are now celebrated cultural/historical tourist attractions in Tianjin.

In the late 1980s, eager to attract business ventures and tourism to Tianjin and to accentuate Tianjin's cultural and historical uniqueness, the then mayor of Tianjin and head of the Hebei District, which houses the former Italian concession, became immensely interested in transforming the former Italian concession into a new cultural and historical icon of Tianjin. However, lack of financial resources for the potentially huge project presented a major challenge. The mayor and the district head thus made more than ten trips to countries in Europe and to Italy, in particular, hoping to procure their investment for the project, but to little avail. In 2003 Tianjin had a new mayor, Dai Xianglong. An influential official with strong connections to China's national banks, Dai was able to obtain a huge loan for Tianjin's various urban construction projects. A lion's share of this loan was invested in the restoration and refurbishment of the Italian town in the Hebei District, which acquired primary and special recognition among the restoration projects in Tianjin. The former concession gained special consideration especially because of its central location along the Hai River, the large number of residential homes with gardens that once housed famous historical figures such as Liang Qichao (statesman and scholar) and Cao Yu (playwright), and its diverse architectural styles with distinct Italian flavours.

The renovation project involved an enormous amount of work. The original Italian concession had more than 300 historical buildings. During the reconstruction process, only about 130 buildings survived as a good number of them, deemed too small or insignificant or in poor shape, were dismantled. Moreover, during the Cultural Revolution, many residents with what were regarded as dubious political backgrounds were driven out of their spacious houses, which had been immediately occupied by multiple families. Over the years and especially as a result of the 1976 earthquake, many buildings and facilities in the area suffered damage and local people
managed to build their own temporary housing there, which led to the construction of various types of irregular-looking shelters. For many households, temporary shelters turned into permanent ones. Thus, when the renovation project began in earnest in 2003, the former Italian concession appeared chaotic and disorderly. The renovation project started with the removal and relocation of numerous families and factories/shops that had made their way in the area. The relocation cost in 2003 alone amounted to 600 million yuan (Wang Jing: 2005). The case of Tianjin, similar to the case of Datong discussed by Cui in this volume, reveals the important role one powerful individual official can have in the heritagization and branding process in contemporary China.

The renovation process was complex and expensive. For example, the famous former two-storey residence of Liang Qichao containing his elegant Yinbing Room were among the highlights of the former Italian concession. Designed by an Italian architect in the early twentieth century, Liang lived and worked there for fifteen years. Due to the fame that Liang and his Yinbing Room enjoyed, Liang’s residence was chosen to be the first example of Italian-style architecture to be restored by the Tianjin municipal government in 2001, even before the general renovation of the Italian section began. At the time, not only was the residence in terrible shape, but it was also occupied by more than ten households. The local government spent around 20 million yuan on the relocation of the residents inside and the reconstruction job. The renovated Residence and Yinbing Room were open to the public in 2002 and attracted many visitors (Wang 2005; Tian 2010). Meanwhile, they also received the status of ‘Historical and Stylistic Architecture of Tianjin’.

Hai He Construction and Development Investment Company and FLIGHT (fulaite) Construction Company in Tianjin, as well as the Italian SIRENA Consulting Company were major players in the restoration project. SIRENA was selected mainly because it had accumulated experience in restoring historical sites in Naples, Italy (Wang 2005). However, the rebuilding of the Italian section also met with criticism as it appeared to cater mainly to business or commercial interests. Also, for several years while the Italian section was under construction/reconstruction, the area was often referred to as a ghost town since local residents were relocated and no business enterprises were in operation. At night, the entire area was in total darkness. Nie Lansheng, a professor at the College of Architecture at Tianjin University, maintains critically that, ‘it seems the major goal is not to protect the original buildings, but to adapt to tourist interests’. An American businessman working in Tianjin at the time also commented that ‘to change the original pattern on a massive scale and to destroy a large
number of buildings have led to the disappearance of the city’s richness and growth’ (Zhong 2009: 1-7).

The newly rebuilt Italian section centres on Marco Polo Plaza and Dante Square. Originally, in the middle of Marco Polo Plaza stood a stone column, on top of which was a bronze statue of the Goddess of Peace holding a sword. The statue was removed after the Communist takeover. During the Cultural Revolution, the stone column was pasted with revolutionary slogans. In the end even the stone column disappeared. Upon receipt of the first tranche of loans, the Committee of the Italian Exotic District decided to first restore the statue, perceived to be the most important symbol of the plaza, by using old photos as a reference for its reconstruction. The committee tried to recreate an exact replica of the stone column and the statue standing on top of it. The only change made was that the goddess would hold an olive branch instead of a sword. Li Xinjing, who worked for the Hai He Company at the time, explains that ‘back then when the company started working on the statue, it did not think it was acceptable for the people of Tianjin to have a foreign statue holding a sword because they were still sensitive to the past insults. However, it would be fine today as we Chinese are now more self-confident’ (Zhong 2009: 5).

Even though the origin of the former Italian concession represents part of a humiliating modern history for Tianjin, in particular, and China at large, it assumed a new identity and significance in post-Mao China when modernity, globalization, and commercialization became some of the key elements of Chinese society. Consequently, the Tianjin municipal government was eager to find innovative ways to move Tianjin in the new direction and elevate the city’s national and international prestige and reputation. Deliberating more in terms of city branding and the benefits associated with heritage commodification and economic promises, the local government then found in the former Italian concession an excellent way to promote tourism, commercial ventures, and Tianjin’s status as an internationally oriented city. Consequently, the concession has been singled out for extensive destruction, renovation, and reconstruction, mainly because the former Italian concession was well planned originally and the buildings within the concession were relatively well preserved and of diverse designs, thus giving the appearance of a seemingly miniature or small Italy within Tianjin.

Upon gaining control over Tianjin in January 1949 when the People’s Liberation Army defeated Nationalist troops in a famous military campaign, CCP officials proceeded to erase the city’s symbols of imperialism. To relinquish the colonial past of the Italian area and as a way to demonstrate the new government’s firm takeover of imperialistic powers’ former possession of Chinese territories, the original Italian names for buildings and streets were
all changed to Chinese ones. Consequently, Marco Polo Road took on the new name Minzu or National Road and Dante Avenue assumed the name of Ziyou or Liberty Avenue. In post-Mao China, the local authorities intended once more to dissociate the area from its colonial past, albeit for a completely different reason. Therefore, the new name ‘Italian-Style Exotic District’ or ‘Italian-Style Town’ as the Chinese translation states, disguises the fact that the rebuilt site derives from a former concession and was controlled and run by the Italians for half a century. Also, some of the old names, such as Marco Polo Plaza and Dante Square, have been restored to give the rebuilt Italian section an aura of authenticity. The reconstruction of the Italian section began in 2002 and was largely completed in 2005. It was then opened to the public. In 2011, it was officially designated as a four-star tourist attraction, and in 2013 the Tianjin municipal government named it a historical and cultural heritage site.

In an effort to highlight the cultural importance of the Italian section and to encourage tourism and commercial investment/ventures, the local authorities carried out intensive and extensive promotional initiatives. For example, before and after the Italian section was opened to the public, in different districts in Tianjin small triangular flags with the words
‘Italian-Style Exotic District’ were tied to electric poles all over the major city streets for the purpose of advertisement.

Catering to the new political, commercial, and cultural atmospheres and responding to the Tianjin municipal government’s call for promoting the international image of the city, and to the vested interests of the Hebei District, a number of local writers were called upon by the Committee of the Italian Exotic District to write on a variety of topics related to the Italian section in order to broaden the site’s appeal. In the promotional pamphlets and books on the area, such as *The Exotic Style of the Italian Street* and *A Glance Back at One Hundred Years and the Return of the Italian Style*, writers from Tianjin unanimously praise the reconstruction and renovations of the former Italian concession. In the Preface of one such book, writer Fang Xuan states that due to the far-sighted leadership of the Tianjin government, related agencies have focused on the protection and preservation of historical architecture in the city. As tourism gains extraordinary importance today, historical buildings and sites are now a significant part of tourist resources. Nowadays, leaders with vision focus on turning existing historical buildings into a precious treasure. He further claims that ‘to build the Italian Exotic Area on the basis of the former Italian Concession site is a move that benefits the country and benefits the people’ (Fang 2001: 2). Meanwhile, to elevate the status of Marco Polo Plaza, one local writer, Yang Zhijiu, who contributed a short piece entitled ‘Bravo to Rebuild Marco Polo Plaza’ to the said book, puts it this way: ‘The reconstruction of Marco Polo Plaza will enhance the friendship between the Chinese and Italian people, stimulate not only the friendly communication between the two peoples, but also the economic and cultural exchanges between China and Italy and between China and other countries in the world’ (Yang 2001: 1-3). Another well-known scholar, Luo Shuwei, who specializes in the history of Tianjin, glorifies the achievements and contributions of Vincenzo Fileti, Consul General of the Italian section between 1909 and 1919, in an article entitled ‘Fileti and the Opening up of the Italian Concession in Tianjin’ (Luo 2001: 4-8).

The officially authorized publication, *A Glance Back at One Hundred Years and the Return of the Italian Style*, also contains much sensational language. For example, the book claims proudly that the reconstructed Italian section has breathed new life into the hundred-year-old architecture and that its original organizers and builders have bequeathed a fond memory of history to the people of Tianjin (Tianjin Haihe Yishifengqingqu Guanweihui n.d.: 5). In an attempt to shape or engineer tourist perceptions, the same book also suggests that a trip to the Italian town represents an authentic and memorable experience. Thus, Marco Polo Plaza, Dante Square, and the monumental
fountain are described as reflecting authentic Italian art and architecture (Tianjin Haihe Yishifengqingsu Guanweihui n.d.: 8). Singing the praises of the Italian section, one writer asserts that a visit to the Italian district would make one feel truly in the midst of nineteenth-century Europe. ‘Surrounded by exquisite bars and a serene environment, while sitting on the wooden benches and listening to saxophone playing would situate one in Italy indeed’ (Zhongguo Weiyide Yizujie 2016). To explain the ubiquitous flower beds within the Italian section, the tourist guide claims that that is the way they appear in Italy and that the Italian town in Tianjin would like to recreate exactly the same environment to ensure an authentic experience for tourists and visitors.5

To further enhance the significance of the new Italian section, local writers in Tianjin typically list and discuss notable Chinese individuals who once resided in the Italian concession. Many prominent Chinese, including famous scholar and reformer Liang Qichao, well-known playwright Cao Yu, and a number of renowned politicians, military leaders, writers, and entrepreneurs, chose to live in the concession at one time or other due to its serene setting and unique architecture. When describing the Italian-style town, a number of writers use the word ‘charming’. One writer asserts that ‘the Tianjin municipal government has made the decision to turn this charming historical site into the Italian exotic area. This marvellous decision will not only preserve culture, history, and a taste of Italy, but will also open a new page of our times. It will promote tourism and business prosperity, and bring about a vigorous and youthful age for this ancient section.’ He further claims that ‘the outstanding consequences created by this move will be everlasting’ (Cui 2001: 35).

Interestingly, the new perceptions of the Tianjin government regarding the former Italian concession seems to be in line with the original Italian claims about the goal of the concession, that is, ‘to encourage and expand the commercial relations between the two countries, and export and diffuse the best image of urban, architectonic, and artistic culture at that point of time to a country so far away from Italy like China’ (Marinelli 2007: 131). In an effort to highlight the city’s rich historical past, new Chinese writings gloss over or mention as a side note the ignominious origin of the Italian section, in particular, and the foreign concessions at large. Thus, the official writings invariably maintain that even though the inception of foreign concessions represented China’s historical humiliations, including the blatant infringement of Chinese sovereignty, economic invasion, and spiritual enslavement, they have nevertheless reshaped the landscape of Tianjin and the foreign architecture within them has allowed the people of Tianjin to indulge in

5 This observation is based on my own visit to the Italy-Style Exotic District.
a ‘fond memory of the city’s past history’ (Tianjin Haihe Yishifengqingqu Guanweihui n.d.: 6).

To highlight the importance of colonial buildings, one local writer argues at great length that since architecture is set in stone, it is emotionless. While the buildings served foreign imperialists in the past, they now serve the Chinese people. To him, today’s China is no longer the same as it was in the old days when foreign powers could act lawlessly and wilfully in China. Although it is necessary to remember the humiliating history, it is not necessary to harbour hatred towards the architecture associated with it. One should instead appreciate and utilize the former concessions with the mind set of acting as their new masters (Guo 1999: 2). Feng Jicai, a native of Tianjin and famous writer, has exerted a lot of effort in recent decades calling for the preservation of historical and cultural sites in Tianjin. As a renowned advocate for the conservation and preservation of Tianjin’s historical and cultural sites, he was also called upon to contribute to the official booklet on the celebration of the launch of the Italian-Style Exotic District. Interestingly, Feng sees no irony in the fact the heavily commercialized, rebuilt Italian section is labelled as a cultural heritage site and has nothing but praise for the official endeavour. In a short article entitled ‘Italy along the Hai River’, Feng adopts the usual writing style of first condemning the former concessions’ symbolic representation of Tianjin’s colonial past and quickly moving on to highlight their historical importance. He thus argues that while the Italian architecture serves as a vivid reminder of the harsh and humiliating history that Tianjin once endured, their value goes well beyond ‘being a label as the evil evidence of imperialism’ that needs to be eradicated. Their historical heritage represents valuable culture and ‘add uniqueness to the city, and is thus an integral part of the city’s cultural treasury’. Feng further claims that ‘the Italian section provides rich historical and cultural resources to the city and that history does not simply belong to the past, but can also serve the present and the future’. Feng concludes that transforming the former Italian concession into an exotic street is a remarkable achievement and that the people of Tianjin ‘should turn passive history into a charming future to make full use of Tianjin’s colourful and rich historical resources’ (Feng 2001: 4-7).

Amid the official and scholarly glorification of the Italian-Style Town, the voices of roughly 5000 families from the area who were relocated to different parts of the city were lost. According to a cadre who works for the management committee of the Italian-Style Exotic District, the 5000 families that were moved out of the area received either monetary compensation or housing accommodation.
and improvement of the Italian heritage in Tianjin can be compared with the broad support that Geng Yanbo received in Datong when he decided to recreate lost historical sites (discussed in detail by Cui in this volume).

While some buildings within the area are labelled ‘historical and stylistic architecture of Tianjin’ under the ‘protection’ of Tianjin municipal government, most buildings house bars, coffee shops and Western-style restaurants. Advertisements and slogans are visible everywhere within the district. One advertisement for an upmarket hotel claims, ‘Have a Taste of a Century’s Italy-Style Exotic Flavor and Enjoy Our Luxury Hotel’. One slogan appearing in both English and Chinese states ‘Exotic Flavor, Special Prosperity’.

Conclusion

China’s humiliating defeat in the Second Opium War and the ensuing signing of the Treaty of Peking (1860) led to the opening up of Tianjin as a treaty port and saw an influx of foreign consulates and entrepreneurs. Between 1860 and 1902, nine foreign powers established concessions in the city and transformed the city into the largest treaty port in north China. A city moulded by both foreign stimuli and internal dynamics, Tianjin’s rise to economic and political prominence went hand in hand with its status as a treaty port and with the official reform and modernization efforts. Both foreign stimuli and internal dynamics played important roles in the development and transformation of the city. This Chinese city’s unique historical legacy has reconfigured the present, and still shapes the present urban form. In the new ideological ethos of post-Mao China and in the context of cultural and economic globalization, physical products of past imperialism are subject to new understanding and interpretation. Nevertheless, to reconcile the CCP’s relatively recent anti-imperialist outcry with its current celebration of the physical display of former imperialistic penetration into China often presents a contested and paradoxical area. Today, the municipal government of Tianjin has regarded the foreign-style architecture within the former concessions not so much as a symbol of imperialist penetration, but as tangible cultural and architectural heritage that needs to be preserved and protected, and has bequeathed a more diverse and culturally rich identity to the city of Tianjin. Eager to promote Tianjin’s distinctiveness, the local authorities have seemingly created a new heritage site in the reconstructed Italian-Style Exotic District. To enhance the importance of the Italian area, local Chinese publications typically hail its charm and authenticity while ignoring its former identity as a colonial concession, and list important national figures, such as former presidents,
premiers, members of the Qing imperial family, prominent warlords, famous writers, and entrepreneurs, who once lived in the concession to further accentuate the area’s illustrious past. The choice of the name for the rebuilt Italian section was also interesting, as the flamboyant-sounding new name, Italian-Style Exotic District, cleverly hides the origin of the Italian concession as a colonial experience for Tianjin. The re-representation of the former Italian concession is motivated by a number of factors: to attract tourists and business enterprises, to advocate Tianjin as an international city, to celebrate Tianjin as a city with a rich cultural diversity, and a city that once housed many ‘celebrities’. All of these have become boasting points for Tianjin, a city that has been in economic and cultural eclipse in recent years. In a way, the reconstructed Italian section epitomizes the changing perceptions of modernity and the political, cultural, and commercial ethos of China of recent decades, and is meant to demonstrate that Tianjin has a rich cultural and historical foundation and is a cosmopolitan city that has long gone global.

References

Bun, Kwan Man (2001). The Salt Merchants of Tianjin: State-Making and Civil Society in Late Imperial China (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press).
Feng, Jicai (1999). ‘Chanshi Wu Da Dao’ [A discussion on the five great avenues], in Wu Da Dao de Gushi [The story of the five great avenues], ed. by Guo Zhangjiu, Sun Huaqi and Yang Zuyao (Tianjin: Baihua Wenyi Chubanshe), 4-12.
Feng, Jicai (2001). ‘Haihebiande Yidali’ [Italy along the Hai River], in Yishijie Fengqing [The exotic style of the Italian street], ed. by Guo Zhangjiu (Tianjin: Baihua Wenyi Chubanshe), 4-7.
Tianjin Haihe Yishifengqingqu Guanweihui (n.d.). *Bainianhuimo, Yifenglaixi* [A glance back at one hundred years and the return of the Italian style] (Tianjin: Tianjin Haihe Fengmao Jianshefazhan Youxiangongsi).


About the author

Hong Zhang, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of History, University of Central Florida, Orlando, USA