

## A Preliminary Study on Protection and Development of Traditional Chinese Form of Commercial Shops

SUN Yingfeng<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Department of Design, Shandong University of Arts, Jinan, China.  
\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

Under today's rapid globalization, protecting and inheriting cultural and regional identity has become the consensus of people. China, as the creator and leader of the oriental culture, has many cultural heritage that deserves to be protected by mankind. Among them, the traditional Chinese form of commercial shops is an important part of oriental cities. But with the tide of modern economic development and the change of buildings in modern cities, it is slowly disappearing. Therefore, how to protect, pass down and develop the technique of expression of traditional form of business environment and represent the aesthetics of oriental architecture is the responsibility of every city builder and protector. Yet, inheritance and development are not to simply copy traditional forms of commercial buildings, but to retain their outstanding traditional aesthetic elements with the principle of "promoting and discarding" and use them with modern technique of expression and decorative design, so that the buildings can reflect both rich traditional visual elements and contemporary aesthetics. This is the effective means combines protection and inheritance.

**Key words:** Commercial shops; Traditional Chinese culture; Modern aesthetic principles; Protection and Development

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### INTRODUCTION

Commodity exchange is a unique phenomenon in human society. With the evolution and development of commercial activities in human society, the business environment has been gradually formed, and commercial shops, emerged as a typical business form, are the inevitable result of the history of human economic activity. Commercial shops are derived from exchange of goods in the process of evolution from marketplaces to cities. Even today, in most cities and towns of the world, commercial shops are an essential part of the business environment.

In China's long history, commercial activities gradually emerged with human evolution and development. As people's exchanging activities of necessities gradually increased, fixed trading places appeared in people's living environments. In other words, the commercial buildings may have appear in the early stage when ground buildings appeared. The continuous expansion of residential areas commonly chosen by people facilitated rapid population growth. As the residents had different social division of labor, more demand for production and daily life were created. People needed to put their excess means of production and means of livelihood on the market in exchange for their necessary means of production and means of livelihood at equal value. Such exchange activities gradually evolved into the marketplace, and the form of "marketplace" was gradually formed. In the expansion and evolution of form and size of the marketplace, the prototype of city appeared. Small cities gradually formed, making commercial activities gradually gathered to form relatively concentrated areas for business. With the development of the monetary business model, the ways of commodity trading were regularized and fixed, which gradually pushed the evolution from mobile and non-fixed mode of marketplace to the fixed mode of goods-

selling shops. These commercial areas were commercial core blocks in a city or district formed by connecting separate commercial shops, and main structural monomers that make up these blocks are commercial shops, which are the most common business environment mode we can still see nowadays.

## 1. STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE COMMERCIAL SHOPS

Most traditional Chinese commercial shops have the structure of “shop in the front and workshop in the backyard”. The so-called “shop in the front and workshop in the backyard” means the front space of the shop is used to sell commodities, and the space at the back is used to process commodities. The “shop in the front” is the consumer-oriented space opens to the street and has functions of displaying and selling goods. The “workshop in the backyard” is the production or processing space of goods that are relatively closed and located at the back of the shop. In ancient China, most commodities were made and sold by manual workshops. This mode is very different from the business model of today’s commercial shops that only have the function of selling.

The structure of a traditional Chinese commercial shop consists of elements like lintel plaque, architectural support struts and cloth shop sign etc.

Lintel plaque is the horizontal inscribed board with shop name on it and hung above the door and under the roof. In all dynasties of China and in both northern and southern China, most shops adopted this plaque structure. It is also known as façade signboard.

The plaques are normally in a horizontal rectangle shape. Shop name or trademark is usually inscribed at the center of the plaque, and font of the inscription usually adopts neat calligraphy, but seldom adopts cursive. The reason for this is that in the flourishing areas where commercial shops concentrate, the numerous commercial storefronts bring a lot of information into consumers’ eyes. Therefore, the demand for legibility requires businesses avoid cursive fonts that are less legible. Legible fonts enable the viewer identify shop name faster and make the plaque better play its visual function.

In terms of the use of color, the most common base color of plaques is black; color schemes of wood, ochre and white are also used. The most common base color of inscriptions on plaques is gold; color schemes of white and green are less commonly used. The overall color of the plaque is usually consistent with the overall color of the shop front, and observes the principle that the color relations are both striking and yet coordinate with colors of the body building of shop front, creating a powerful but not intruding vision effect.

## 2. STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE COMMERCIAL SHOPS

Layout, façade decoration technique and expressive technique of traditional commercial shops have a clear path of development and evolution law. In terms of the layout of main structure of the buildings, single-story or two-story building structure is widely adopted. In terms of material, most of the buildings are made of wood or mixture of brick and wood.

There are two categories of wooden structures: detachable door panel structure and door-window-split structure. The shops with detachable door panel structure of shop front commonly have an open first-floor space, and the shop front is usually shut by putting door panels one next to the other in non-business hours. Before open for business everyday, the door panels are removed, so that the shop is open to the street and people can go into the shop to buy goods. This kind of structure is commonly found in southern China. In the door-window-split structure, the door and window are separated by building support struts, and the door and the window are two independent structures. During business hours, the door is opened in one direction by rotating about the pivot, so that the interior shop space is open to the street. The window can be also opened in one direction independently. This kind of structure is commonly found in northern China.

In terms of the layout of the shop front, the basic elements of ancient shops are very similar. Architectural appearance, architectural layout, construction materials and other aspects of the shops are also extremely similar. Yet the shops are very different in architectural styles. Architecture styles in each region have regional characteristics and expression language. Styles of these storefronts are often evolved from the conventional style of residential architecture in that region, and generally consistent with the style of the city or region the shops are located in.

The biggest difference between commercial storefronts and civil residence is that commercial storefronts are more open. Layout of storefronts tries to open shop space to the outside world to the maximum in order to better display commercial space or exhibition space for goods. Therefore, openness and permeability are the most prominent structure layout features of commercial storefronts. Another difference is that façade decoration or decorative language of commercial storefronts is richer and more diverse than those of civil residence. Decoration of frontage of civil residence is a clear representation of wealth gap. Decorative language and decorative elements are usually richer in wealthy civil residence, while for ordinary civil residence, the key demand is to realize living functions, decorative elements or modifications outside the architecture are basically simplified. Compared

with commercial shops, styles and frontages of residential architecture often have different decorative language and techniques. The most notable is that shops usually have shop signs or carriers with soliciting information on them, which is the biggest functional difference from civil residence.

Structure layout of most traditional Chinese commercial shops has a similar style. The lintel plaque sits high on the top of the storefront; there is a couplet on columns on both sides of the door, the layout is similar to the pattern of couplets on the doors of traditional Chinese civil residence. There are also decorative ornaments on other parts of the storefront, which are often similar to some architectural elements of the palace. In ancient China, there were strict regulations on various types of architectures and decorations. For example, golden and green glazed tiles are used in architectural structures the palace; apart from the palace, only architectures like Confucian temples are allowed to use golden and green glazed tiles. Other architectures, such as the residence of nobles and officials, can only use grey tiles. There were regulations on size of doors, specifications of decorations and *mendang* (门当, a pair of drum-like stones at the threshold), and building materials. Architectures were designed and built according to different social hierarchies. In the context of civil society, design and building of commercial shops must observe certain regulations, but the regulations were generally not as strict as the regulations for civil residence.

Visually, traditional Chinese commercial shops have very uniform structure layout. 90% of them adopt wooden structures. The doors are commonly made with wooden door panels, wooden grid windows and wooden grid structures. Wood carvings are frequently used at the main junctions. Commercial shops that are in bigger size and well-funded usually have bigger main architectural structure and more decorations—this is a way to show strength of the shops. In the column structure of the façade, beams and rafters are usually carved or painted, either carving or painting techniques are used. Some walls are decorated with lots of brick or stone carvings.

In the structure layout of most commercial shops, the lintel plaque is the core visual area. The main function of commercial shops is commercial sales. Commercial sales must be easily identified of its industry. As the carrier of leading information of the shops, lintels play an important role in identifying the shops and guiding consumers. They have the guiding functions of displaying shop name, brand, type of industry and nature of commodity. The front of people's visual process is focused on the area of lintel plaque. Therefore, lintel plaques become the most important visual area in the structure layout of storefront. They are also people's visual focus. In view of this, most businesses pay a lot of attention to lintel plaque design and production. In addition to the cultural deposit

of shop name, there are also very strict requirements on aspects like the font selection and the writing skill of the calligraphy font. Most of the calligraphy of the inscription on plaques is in a vigorous, heavy and forceful hand writing. The inscription is arranged to be read from right to left, and is usually in a single row. This is because that there shouldn't be too much characters in the inscription (generally no more than 10 characters). The edges of the plaque are usually decorated with decorative elements, which are in diverse expression languages and styles, such as linear lines, curved lines, and most commonly rectangular spirals and curling tendril designs.

There are three ways of handing plaques: flat attaching, tilted hanging and suspension. Flat attaching is to attach the back of the plaque flat on top of the lintel panel structure, making the plaque perpendicular to the ground vertically and parallel with and firmly attached to the lintel. Tilted hanging is to fix the bottom edge of the plaque to the lintel panel and tilt the top edge of the plaque forward at a 45-degree angle, making the plaque perpendicular to the viewers' line of sight, which is in line with people's perspectives. This structure is commonly found in big shops with larger volume and higher lintel. Suspension is to hang the plaque with metal material or ropes, making it closer to people's perspective. This structure is more suited to shops with higher buildings, and is commonly found in the southern China where wind is less powerful.

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### 3. USE OF COLORS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE COMMERCIAL SHOPS

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In terms of the overall use of colors in storefront, black, red, ochre and wood color are commonly used, and colors with higher saturation, such as bright red, green, yellow and orange, are seldom used. In ancient China, the traditional way of life and business environment also pursued the learned and refined visual language, and the aesthetic language of the harmony between man and nature were also emphasized. Thus the colors used fit in with the surrounding natural, cultural and architectural environment, tone and color contrast are highly coordinated and harmonized with the surrounding tone.

The elements that have more color change are the advertising materials in front of shops, such as banners and cloth shop signs. These carriers generally have bright colors, such as proper amount of red and yellow. In the long history of China, red was a dedicated color for celebration in many eras. Red is common in festive occasions like the Spring Festival, weddings, ceremonies for imperial examinations and birthdays, but is rarely used in normal times. In the decoration of commercial shops, red is also associated with occasions like the Spring Festival, anniversary of the shop and wedding banquet etc. Red usually appears in lantern covers and silk flower

bunches on the plaque. In normal times, these colors of high brightness rarely appear.

In terms of the use of color in texts, gold, black, white and green are usually used, and few other colors are used, especially red. In all Chinese dynasties, red was rarely used in writing. In Chinese tradition, the approvals or comments of emperors were written in red (thus known as zhupi, 朱批); the criminal judgments were also written in red. Red is thus rarely used in everyday writing of text messages. Therefore, extensive use of red inscriptions in modern social environment is inconsistent with Chinese cultural traditions. In addition, as a warning color in modern society, red is widely used in traffic signals and fire warnings. In people's daily life, red should not be used in excess in living environment except in occasions like the Spring Festival, weddings and ceremonies.

#### 4. CURRENT SITUATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE COMMERCIAL SHOPS

China is a country with a long history and rich cultures. In the long process of historical evolution, it has developed a unique cultural context and aesthetics. In spite of changes of dynasties, our visual environment is developing under the background of linear traditional culture. As an integral part of people's lives, commercial environment has also been guided by the traditional aesthetic standards and cultural context. The seemingly free commercial environment system is in fact represented under a certain cultural background and following the traditional aesthetic standards and expression languages, rather than expressed based on individual's aesthetic and cultural quality. This helps pass down the commercial visual modes that represent our unique and oriental cultural context and Chinese aesthetic characteristics, forming the form and language patterns we see today. In many ancient cities and ancient towns in remote areas in China, the expression language of traditional business environment has been passed down from generation to generation. Despite the evolution through times and the erosion of age, we can still clearly restore its developing and evolving process. These are the cultural heritage our ancestors left us. They are art treasures, and allow us to have a clear track of history to explore.

History develops, time marches on, and the world becomes smaller. With the development of the globalization, more and more modern business environment has gradually taken the place of those typical traditional commercial shops. A universal language is bringing countries and peoples closer, and is accelerating cultural integration. However, with the growing pursuit of diversity and individuation, people begin to realize that rich cultures owned by different countries and different peoples are not contradictory to globalization.

Globalization is not a substitution and subversion of one cultural and aesthetic language by another culture and aesthetic language. Different cultural and aesthetic languages are rather in a complementary and harmonious symbiotic relationship. The context of globalization should be a humanistic environment that is clearly differentiated, with national characteristics and created with modern form language by combining international language and aesthetic standards with national and traditional elements. Commercial shops in the commercial environment are also one of the most important nodes in humanistic environment.

In contemporary China, with the development of times and economic growth, we have gained cultural confidence. Our traditional culture has made many contributions in terms of thinking and vision to the world. People have come to find the value that Chinese culture, as a representative of the oriental culture characteristics, possesses, and as it is discovered and disseminated by people, it is known around the world. Meanwhile, we have also clearly realized that we have many problems and shortcomings in inheriting and developing the cultural traditions of China. For example, we have many misunderstandings in inheriting and developing the traditional business environment and characteristics of shops.

Currently in China, many cities are actively engaged in restoring and imitating ancient commercial districts. Most of the ancient buildings and ancient commercial districts were demolished due to historical reasons, and are now replaced with neither modern nor ancient commercial districts. These newly-built antique districts have neither modern language and aesthetics nor national or traditional features, and their structural styles and decorative languages are nondescript. This phenomenon has even spread throughout the country that styles of construction in most cities are similar to each other, resulting in what some described as the "identical cities" and making our cities and business environment extremely identical. In this context, many cities begin to wake up and realize the importance of business environment with unique national characteristics, and they start to imitate traditional commercial districts. They have good intentions, but in the process of construction, they have encountered a lot of problems. The most prominent problem is that the imitation of commercial environment or districts doesn't strictly follow the traditional Chinese architectural design and decorative language, nor respect the traditional aesthetic rules, resulting in the chaos in architectural structure, use of color, decorative language, overall aesthetics and many other aspects in antique commercial districts. This is caused by the disruption in traditional culture and aesthetics. People rarely have precise studies on the context of traditional cultural expressions, and rarely think about damage brought by the imprecision to our aesthetics.

Times have progressed. In people's exploration and research on traditional culture, some cities begin to grasp the pulse of progression. They start to consider the dialectical relationship between traditions and inheriting and development, and protect and develop traditional culture and traditional commercial districts with the principle of "promoting and discarding". The Southern Song Imperial Street in Hangzhou, the China Lane and Jinli Street in Chengdu and the Nanluoguxiang in Beijing are very good models in this respect. This is exactly what we should do and one of rational ways of inheriting traditional culture.

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## CONCLUSION

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Through study and analysis of the traditional Chinese form of commercial shops, this paper rationally combs the historical development course of traditional Chinese commercial shops, and analyzes expression techniques and methods of the structural elements, architectural forms and aesthetic decorative languages of the traditional commercial shops. The paper also tries to find a characteristic development course for modern cities from the perspective of both protection

and inheritance. This is the purpose of this research paper. Formation and evolution of traditional Chinese commercial shops are more than simple embodiment of business forms, its developing track is also an important part of the manifestation of traditional Chinese culture and an important manifestation of the development course of China's ancient and modern cities. Under the background of today's rapid economic development and urbanization in China, raising problems of how to protect and inherit traditional Chinese form of commercial shops and conducting effective research and use have a great practical value and social significance for creating characteristic urban cultural environment, improving the image of cities, fully tapping regional and urban culture deposit and many other aspects.

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