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## A Changing Process of Traditional Built Environment in Yunnan, China

*This study captures evidence of the different meanings of tradition in two sites in Yunnan province, in Southwest China. It compares the development of the capital city, Kunming, which represents people's desire for the modernity, to the Old Town in Lijiang county where a traditional environment has been regenerated for tourism. In Kunming, the definitions of old and new, tradition and modern are eventually blurred, whereas in Lijiang, a bold celebration of its regenerated indigenous roots forces people to accept and to think. Both strategies allow the places to compete in and connect to the global economy.*

### **Introduction**

Situated in Southwest China, Yunnan province is the sixth largest of China's provinces. It shares borders in the south and west with Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, and has been known as the gateway from China to South Asia. After the China-ASEAN (Association of South-East Asia Nations) Free Trade Zone was signed up to be operational after 2010, Yunnan's role as the gateway has become even more important. Yunnan is very well known for a very high level of ethnic diversity with 26 ethnic groups out of total 56 in China. It was also one of China's less developed provinces. Many rural families, especially in the peripheral areas, have considerably lower incomes compare to those in the developed regions. Kunming is the provincial capital of Yunnan. It is a city with a long history of more than one thousand and two hundred years. The city has changed dramatically since the 1980s.

The Old Town of Lijiang, Dayan Zhen, is a well-preserved central town of the Lijiang Autonomous County of the Naxi Ethnic Minority in Yunnan Province. The Old Town was first built in the late Song Dynasty and the early Yuan Dynasty with a history of more than 800 years. Since Kublai Khan, the first emperor of the Yuan Dynasty, set his reign in the region, Lijiang has been a political, cultural, and educational centre, playing an important role in the trading activities among China, India and many other Asian countries.

Throughout the twentieth century, theories and practices related to vernacular built environments in China were derived from the tension between two demands: to reflect tradition and to be modern. However, since the 1980s, the need to confront rapid economic growth and respond to new influences from developed countries has caused Chinese design and planning to go through a period of rapid transformation and change. In particular, since architectural modernism and post-modernism movements were introduced in the 1980s, many new buildings in China have been referred to as traditional, modern or postmodern. But one may question the meanings of these terms. Because much of China never went through a period of modernization and modernization, as in the west, the concepts and frames of reference for tradition, modernism and post-modernism in China are different from those in other parts of the world.

In the early twenty-first century, both the cities and towns in China have opened to outside influence for more than 20 years. In Kunming, after initial anxieties about the conflict between tradition and modernity, this dynamic seems to have produced a condition in which there is no clear definition of the two. And, rather than differentiate designs as traditional or modern, or modern or post-modern, there is increasing interest in hybrid juxtapositions. In the twenty-first century, thus, hybrid effects embed tradition in a new material environment, overcoming older conflicts. More importantly, they position the city internationally in a global network, which is increasingly important considering Kunming's new role as a gateway from China to Southeast Asia.

By contrast, in the Old Town in Lijiang, tourists confront a well-preserved traditional built environment. Yet everything there has been encoded with alternative meanings, so that the products and spaces are interpreted by the local residents and the visitors in different ways. In this sense, the place has managed to

sustain an ongoing and interactive conversation between various groups. This process has changed through time, creating new ideas, social structures, and meaningful places. But there can be no single authentic lingua franca in such an endeavor. The same as that in Kunming, the strategy was not to invoke a sense of nostalgia. Rather than keeping the Old Town as a static tradition, the tradition has been reinvented in order to compete in the competitive tourist destinations in the region.

The following analysis first provides a brief outline of Kunming and Lijiang planning since the 1980s in order to identify some key factors that have dictated urban planning decisions. It then examines the use of the public spaces in Kunming and the Old Town in Lijiang that illustrate the relationship between tradition and modernity when Kunming strives to develop into a metropolis with international fame, and the Old Town in Lijiang manages to develop its traditional roots to compete with other tourist destinations in the region.

### **Kunming in Yunnan province**

Today's Kunming city started from Tuodong city, also named Shanchan City, built in Tang Dynasty (AD 765). From the Tuodong city to the Yunnan Prefectural city of the Ming Dynasty, the changes of ancient city space and pattern had been consistent on focusing on the harmony between the surrounding green mountains and water with its built environment. On the other hand, it appears that the city's military and political functions had more influence on the city patterns than its economical functions. Various military camps and government offices were deployed in the city throughout the long history<sup>1</sup>.

The city is now an important regional central city with a 4.7 million population in 2002<sup>2</sup>. It is also called 'Spring City' due to the pleasant weather all year round. The development of the city has adopted the historic Old City as its center. The same as other cities in China, it was believed that this was more economical than building a new center, consequently many of Kunming's subsequent conservation and traffic management problems stem from the choice of this site.

In 1982 a new set of policy guidelines specified that Kunming's primary function to be a political and cultural center in the province. The planning proposed the Kunming City's designated property, the size and direction for urban development, with its layout pattern kept the same as that compiled during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1982, for the first time Kunming was designated as one of first groups of the Famous Historical and Cultural cities in China.

An unprecedented construction boom was launched in China in the 1980s, funded largely by the private sector, and fuelled by foreign capital. The main task of the 1982 planning policy initially was to control the development of large cities. The plan was conservative in the size of the city proper and the arrangement of road networks. In Kunming, the construction of the southern second ring road led the development of the city extend to the south and eventually the expansion was out of control<sup>3</sup>. With rapid change of the urban fabric and increased population, the plan was modified in 1987 to include a larger city area consisted of the city center and eight fringe districts in a radiant pattern. At the same time, many projects in old town redevelopment were carried out. The main traditional streets and roads, such as Zhengyi Road, Nanping Street, Renmin Eastern Road, were demolished and rebuilt. The economical and commercial areas along both sides of Beijing Road were extended and built with a large quantity of facilities of commerce, trade, tourism, post and telecommunications, education.

At this time, both the modernism and post-modernism were introduced in China in the 1980s. The Great Wall Hotel and Fragrant Hill Hotel were built in Beijing in 1983. Great Wall Hotel was referred as the style of modernism, Fragrant Hill Hotel the post-modernism. However, the revived discussions on architectural theories of modernism and post-modernism were constrained within the intellectual circles. Facing overwhelming pressure to follow internationally available technical, these new theories had little effect on the design of majority new commercial buildings. In many cases, ready-made ideas were used

and copied without understanding the deeper meanings<sup>4</sup>. In Kunming, two high rise buildings were built: the new Worker's Cultural Palace on the central plaza and the new Municipal Science and Technology Buildings. They marked the start of the process to achieve the desired image of the modern city: a forest of the skyscrapers, the same as those in any international megacity.

Facing the rapidly changes and disappearing of the vernacular houses through the region, academic and architects urged the government to preserve the existing vernacular houses and built environments, especially those in the ethnic areas. Regarding the vernacular architecture, two opposite attitudes have existed simultaneously in China before the 1980s. On the one hand, vernacular buildings are considered to be those least affected by the Confucian ethical values in the sense that they were built and used by the masses instead of by emperors, the aristocracy, literati and officials. They are therefore truly reflections of the various and unique Chinese cultures which were praised after Confucian ethical values were criticised as being feudal during the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, the attack on Chinese traditional and ethnic culture in the Cultural Revolution referred this mass culture as old and superstitious, and seen as being in opposition to socialist modernisation.

After the Cultural Revolution, the research on the cultural background of architecture revived in the 1980s and was emphasised as a topic in research on vernacular architecture. As a province famous for her 26 minority nationalities out of total 56 in China, both in cities and counties in Yunnan, discussions focused on how to keep the traditional ambience of the traditional areas, whether to preserve the existing structures or literally recreating something from the past.

One example to follow in the direction was Juer Hutong in Beijing designed by Wu Liangyong in 1989. The houses were modern in terms of its materials and construction technology, but made use of the traditional courtyard, architectural details and proportions of elements to give a strong traditional feeling. Wu's theory of the design came from Li Zehou's culturalist formulation for tradition and modernism, that is, to incorporate the modern 'substance' in the planning, layout, and other accommodations of the housing, and to maintain with Chinese 'function' or architectural means. As Rowe and Kuan discussed that two traditional Chinese concepts 'Essence' and 'Form' had been explored in China to define what to be designed as both modern and essentially Chinese. There was a transformations of the play between these two concepts, from 'socialist essence and cultural form' in 1950s to a reversed 'modern essence and Chinese form'<sup>5</sup>. In accordance with the development of the understanding of these two concepts, the architectural intellectual circle called for moving the modern architectural projects to look critically at both the western theories and the local vernacular.

Since China opened up to the outside from the 1980s, numerous architectural theories including architectural modernism and postmodernism have flooded in. Books such as Charles Jencks' *The Language of Post-modern Architecture* (1991)<sup>6</sup> and Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1977)<sup>7</sup> were both published in Chinese in 1992. Yet in Yunnan due to its diverse ethnic cultures, rather than focusing on the exploration of the modernism and post-modernism as what happened in other cities, discussion were primarily related to the renewal and protection of the ethnic groups' vernacular houses in the province, books such as *Genius Loci* by Norberg-Schulz (1980)<sup>8</sup> and *House Form and Culture* by Rapoport (1969)<sup>9</sup> were widely quoted on their analysis of building contexts and cultural symbolisms. In practice though, more directly relevant guidance for most designs came from *Vernacular Houses in Yunnan* (1983)<sup>10</sup>, the first book systematically recording the houses of nine ethnic groups in the province, and the second book of the series that recorded other eight ethnic groups plus two previously surveyed groups published in 1992<sup>11</sup>. These two books and other similar researches provided a wide range of vernacular vocabulary to be directly used in designs.

During the 1980s, the flow of people and materials doubled with the economic development in Kunming,

large amount of new residential quarters were built in a relatively short period to meet the urgent needs, consequently many of these new compounds lacked sufficient public facilities and good qualities. Even so, the locals who lived in old courtyard houses preferred to move into those new apartments. Because in most cases, the old houses in both the cities and towns were dilapidated, overcrowded and lack of basic hygiene and cooking facilities. Without enough funding for preservation or refurbishment to cater for the needs for the contemporary life, the householders saw their houses as obsolescent and backward and did not reflect their expected new ways of life. The feelings became even stronger after 1984 when the Third Plenary Session of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee urged the country to move into a socialist planned commodity economy. Following the new regulations, housing can be exchanged as a commodity in the property market for the first time since 1949. This shift immediately led to the new dwelling forms like apartments and the separation of the functions within the accommodation. The new forms of design and construction methods also emerged.

At the same time, the new transport system was introduced to cope with the rapidly increased population. Many traditional roads and streets were modified to provide wider traffic lanes. Kunming's first high-grade highway was built and the transport system of 'two rings with nine exits, six arteries in city' gradually took shape. The Xizhan Overfly, built in 1990 was the first overpass in Kunming. The same as other cities in China, the rapid development and an over-heated boom in real estate development also triggered the problems. The city proper extended in the sprawling way; the large quantity of traditional streets demolished, traffic congestion, and the affected environmental ecology.

In 1992, GMS (Greater Mekong Subregion) entered into a program of subregional economic cooperation, designed to enhance economic relations among its six member countries: China, Cambodia, Lao, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam. As the gateway from China to the South-East Asia, Kunming's role as the provincial capital and the important business and trade center in Southwestern China become even more important. After 1992, the city's tertiary industry developed at top speed; the urbanization speed up and the function of the central city became more prominent<sup>13</sup>. Since then Kunming has built three development zones, and hold two national and one international festival: the Third Chinese Art Festival, the First China Export Commodities Fair, and '99 Kunming International Horticultural Exposition. All these events promoted Kunming's leap forward development.

By 2000, the city expanded to include three secondary cities and about 40 organizational towns within the Great Kunming's administrative area. The embryonic form of network city of Kunming metropolis began to take shape. The main city has newly built three national level development zones: High and New Technology Industry Zone, Economy and Technology Zone, and Dianchi Tourism and Holiday Resort. Promoted by new technologies, biological pharmacy, flowers and plants industry, information industry and tourist industry have been among the fastest growing industries in Kunming. In 2002, Kunming started the operation of the independent bus line system on its main roads, the first example of the kind in China.

With the rapid urban expansion, the massive raising of skyscrapers, primarily in the city center, and the gradual destruction of the historical part of the city, the city faced the danger that its essential identity would be lost. The more the economic developed, the more the value of its indigenous roots to be recognized. The planning policy on the protection of the cultural heritage in the 1990s shifted dramatically from focusing on the spots with the cultural relic to focusing on the whole city's environmental styles and features. A pedestrian plaza between the Dongsi and the Xisi pagodas was built to enhance the city's traditional central axis along Zhengyi Road. The new axis formed along Beijing road also parallel the historical axis to follow the tradition.

### **Kunming in the twenty-first century**

Walking through the city, it appears that there are various zones. Their functions and meanings are

obviously different from one another despite there are no physical boundaries to separate them. Along the main roads, attached to each lamp post is the colorful sign to advertise the new residential compounds. Many of those have names such as Norwegian Forest, Eden Garden, and Swan Lake etc. Inside those compounds one can often find large traditional Chinese gardens with artificial water features, underground parking space and sports areas for kids and seniors. The apartments may be designed as 'Ou Lu Shi' (the European continental style), indicated that their external forms have adopted some architectural elements from the classical European style.

Another prominent feature in the city is called 'villages inside the city'. Those are remains of the farmer villages that used to situate on the edges of the city. They are now almost in the city center after the city sprawled extensively in the 1990s. It became a tendency for farmers in the village to add two, three or more stories on top of their houses to create more renting spaces. Those 'villages inside the city' are now the homes of many floating immigrants. Apart from the administration worries, the areas have their own shortcomings: poor quality of the building structure and real fire danger due to the village layout.

The public spaces in the city, no matter whatever the style they were designed and built, are always used heavily. From early morning, young runners, various groups of mid-age dancers, and people who practice Tai Ji occupy every public plaza, park or courtyard in the residential compound. Those spaces will then be occupied by young kids playing with their nannies, or pensioners who play cards, wei chi, or mah-jongg and many others who have spare time to walk around. At night, almost everyone who lives nearby comes out for fresh air after the dinner.

Different from the early desired image of modernity that numerous monotony skyscrapers filled every corner of the city, the latest Wuhua District government office was the image sought for the twenty-first century Kunming. The new technology is reflected on its exterior: clad with horizontal rows of glass and stainless steel. Yet the single technological statement is not sufficient for the new image. Looked from the east and west directions, the tower had the same profile as the Dongsu and Xisi pagodas that mark two ends of the historic axis of Kunming.

The new central plaza was built on the location of the previous Nanping street. The old street was totally demolished to give way to the new plaza and surrounding commercial buildings. The plaza is decorated with an old Kunming map, some sculptures with traditional features, bronze chairs and ponds. Among those is a traditional Chinese doorway built on the spot where the previous Nanping street started. To mark the location, the door has its own address inscribed on top: 'No. 1 Nanping Street'. As other traditional entrance doors, two Chinese letters were inscribed on either side of the door head: Fu (good fortune) and Shou (long life). As a pleasant surprise, the door has become one of the most popular spots in the plaza. People are queuing to stroke these two letters, which suppose to bring good luck and pass the doorway to have a photo in front. People who wait to go through the door include all ages and kinds; many of them oversea visitors. The plaza then extends to the south as a long thin landscape situating between two contemporary shopping malls. The designed landscape used the regular grids of trees and grass, which appears a novelty to the locals, yet what would make them feel at home is a line of familiar masseurs and masseuses with their stools next to each of the tree block.

### **Old Town in Lijiang**

Different from what happened in Kunming, where the architectural and urban design became less constrained by the blurred definitions between modernized city and its indigenous roots, in the ethnic counties and towns of the province, architects felt much more obliged to keep with the traditional environment. New buildings especially commercial buildings have been in favor of 'modern content and Chinese form' to match the traditional environment. In the process, the roles imagined for and played by contextual considerations and the indigenous landscape were amplified, even if the results were limited because it was challenge to solve contemporary problems such as population and traffic within the

traditional built environments and to relate the contemporary architectural theories with the traditional principles. One special example of the developments in these counties and towns is the Old Town of Lijiang.

The Lijiang Old Town locates on the plateau about 2,400 meters above the sea level. It occupies an area of 3.8 square kilometres. The town is embraced by Mountains in the west and the north, and the vast fertile fields in the southeast. It was built along the lie of mountains and the flow of rivers, well adapted to the topography of its surrounding and the local climate. The layout of the town is free-style and flexible, and the lanes are narrow and meandering. The vernacular houses in the town have incorporated the designs of the Han, Bai, and Zang houses over the history and evolved into the unique Naxi styles. The Old Town is penetrated by many canals originated from the Black Dragon Pool that provide the water usage for the locals. About 350 varied and inimitable bridges and canals make the town one of the most beautiful places in Yunnan. The Naxi also has what is believed to be the only well preserved pictograph language in the world. The Dongba Cultural Research Institute in Lijiang, a tourist attraction in itself, is actively engaged in research into the ancient Naxi culture.

Its rich cultural heritage and varied geography has provided tremendous tourism potential. Following the opening up policies and the rapid economic growth, the provincial government seeks ways to move from the heavy reliance on traditional subsistence agriculture to a more diverse industry and service economy.

### **Naxi vernacular houses in Lijiang**

The first systematic surveys of Naxi houses in Lijiang were conducted by research groups of the Design Institute of Yunnan in the 1980s. This survey data was published in 1986 as: *Vernacular Houses in Yunnan*, Vol. 113. Another survey document, *The Naxi Vernacular Houses*, was published in 1988<sup>14</sup>. The aims of the surveys were to record and collate the rich ethnic architectural traditions in Yunnan, and to learn from the past in order to serve the present. The survey generally focused on the recording and description of material artefacts, including the architectural functions, structure and spatial arrangements. The Old Town in Lijiang was recorded for its suitable location in relation to its surrounding mountains and rivers, variety of the house plans and structures, simple materials and colours, and the delicate wooden works.

Following the economic growth in the 1980s, industries processes and new building technologies rapidly replaced many traditional ways of construction in China. Economic changes had led to an uneven development of houses because of the emerging divisions of wealth. Nevertheless, at this early stage, the majority of householders maintained subsistence agriculture as their predominant economic activity, including those whose members had undertaken supplementary occupations. Therefore, the majority of houses in Old Town in Lijiang maintained their traditional courtyard layouts and other architectural details. The local people still built their own houses through the local builders despite new materials such as bricks were widely used in the new constructions.

The spontaneous and voluntary migration of peasants to urban centres in much of China started to have impact on local people's life. The difficult living conditions in the town due to the lack of basic infrastructure and transport system became worse under the pressure of the rapidly increasing population. The locals started to build in the areas outside of the Old Town as early as 1972 and 1979. These new housing complex were designed and built by the householders and local building teams. Those were two story brick houses surrounding the courtyards; all of which were modified traditional forms with additional kitchens, bathrooms and toilets etc. Without master planning, the public space formed between houses was free style and interesting. But it also led to the disadvantage situations that houses occupied far too large areas and the basic infrastructure was absent in the whole area<sup>15</sup>.

For example, in Lijiang, two housing complexes were built in the new town in the 1980s. The first was designed and built through joint works between the Department of the Construction of the local government and the development companies. All the houses were two-story flat roof brick houses based on the same construction drawings. Without courtyard and other architectural details, the forms of these new houses had no similarities to the traditional ones.

The design and building of the second housing complex was the result of the cooperation between the Department of Construction and the householders themselves. The master plan set up by the Department of Construction allocated the land for each family, and the house was designed and built by the householders through the local builders. Although the individual house looked similar to the traditional Naxi houses, the layout of the whole area was lines of arrayed units.

During the 1990s, the increased wealth among the Chinese translated directly into increased buying power and higher levels of personal consumption. Building boomed in many major cities. More and more architectural practices plunged into the new market system. Confronted the overwhelming outside influence, and also driven by the new experience of competitive market forces, architects, as newly formed professionals in China, moved in the market not only as architectural designers, interior designers, and planners, but also project managers and entrepreneurs. Numerous theories and ideas were quoted to guide the architectural practice. Yet with the increased demanding from the even bold clients and cities competing in the new markets, rather than going through the deeper understanding of the local characteristics, architectural designs were often used to provide the novelty and show off the glory and power.

Same as other major cities, Kunming and Dali were developed based on the old centres in these two places. Consequently following the rapid economic growth and alteration of the former city fabric, traditional narrow streets increasingly imposed difficulties within the main traffic system in the cities. With the traffic flows collecting the various new extensions of the city growing, old streets in the city centre eventually were dismantled and make way for the wide roads or commercial streets. At the early stages of the development, economic growth had the paramount importance over the preservation of the traditional heritage. Developers built for markets rather than for preserving traditional characteristics. The values of the indigenous built environments very often only fully reveal themselves after the cities have gained economic advantages, but at the same time lost their characteristics.

After the hard lessons being learnt in Kunming and Dali, the local government determined to preserve the Old Town in Lijiang. After the major earthquake destroyed a large section of the town in 1996, funds were provided to rebuild the town as it was. The preservation works also benefited enormously from the tourist policies in Yunnan.

### **Tourism Development in Lijiang**

After the 1990s, the development of tourism was high on the agenda of the provincial government. Yunnan is well known for a very high level of ethnic diversity. Its rich cultural heritage and varied geography has provided tremendous tourism potential. Following the opening up policies and the rapid economic growth, the provincial government seeks ways to move from the heavy reliance on traditional subsistence agriculture to a more diverse industry and service economy. One of the solutions to which is to identify tourism as a pillar industry for regional development in Yunnan. The rank of the industrial structure in Yunnan then changed from agriculture, manufacture and tourism to tourism, manufacturing and agriculture<sup>16</sup>.

Responding to the policy of the provincial government, the local governments wish to develop the local communities through local owned small enterprises and for farm-based tourism to act as a vehicle for



integrated rural development to raise income, and redistribute the economic role within the rural household. The government directly participate in the tourism development by organising, providing funds and training for the local communities. Regional authorities played a leading role in the formulation of policy that can be used to develop tourism. The Yunnan Province Tourism Administration (YPTA) was set up to overlook the tourism administration; it was divided into departments of Planning and Development, Policies, Law and Regulations, Personnel and Education and Tourism Enterprise Management. Branches of YPTA were also set up in the cities, prefectures, and counties, performing a facilitating role in developing and managing tourism at the local level<sup>17</sup>.

The planners, architects, anthropologists and other academics, supported by the provincial government policy of creating 'Great Ethnic Culture Province', were actively involved in the developments, seeking ways to link the preservation of ethnic culture and natural environment to the improvement of livelihoods in the promotion of tourism<sup>18</sup>.

As a result, tourism has developed extremely fast and the tourism industry has been recognised as Lijiang's key industry. There were 7 million tourists in Lijiang with a tourism income of 0.16 billion RMB in 1995. In 2002, the tourists to Lijiang rapidly increased to 3.27 million including 120,000 foreign tourists and 3,270,000 domestic tourists. The tourism income went up to 41.86 million USD<sup>19</sup>.

A comprehensive plan for tourism development was put forward to develop 12 key infrastructure projects in Lijiang in 1992, and a large sum of the funds were provided for the improvement of the infrastructure. Until the mid-1990s, access to Lijiang was via the roads circled around its surrounding mountains, which took 3 days to reach Lijiang from Kunming before 1984; the journey reduced to 2 days from 1988 to 1992 due to the improved road conditions and better quality vehicles; after 1994 the journey took 8 hours via the short stretches of the Kunming-Dali highway. In April 1995, Lijiang Airport started a service between Kunming and Lijiang with the flight time of 40 minutes. Following on, other projects such as cleaning the Yuhe square, and relocate the adjacent military accommodation complex etc were also put into implement. In December 1997, Lijiang was designated as World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

The local communities would be the first to feel the impact of the tourism development. The largest employer in Lijiang has been the booming tourism industry. In 2003, 36,000 people were employed directly in tourism and more than 80,000 employees worked indirectly in tourism sector including 67 hotels in Lijiang city and 37 tour agencies<sup>20</sup>. The development indicated a movement away from the agriculture society in the past.

From 2003 to 2007, according to the local newspaper, the Lijiang Old Town Protection and Management Bureau and the International Heritage Fund invested total 2.3 million RMB for the refurbishment of 299 houses and 236 courtyards in the Old Town. The cost of the refurbishment was shared by the householders and the Fund<sup>21</sup>. Government also provided wood and other building materials at a cost below the market value.

### **Old Town in the twenty-first century**

In the 2007 World Association of Chinese Architects Conference held in Lijiang, a call was put forward for a real need to go beyond the empty eclecticism in the building designs, and to meet the social needs and creation and development of a pluralistic architectural culture. As one speaker put it that, there has been the unrealistical chasing for the local characteristics without the deeper understanding of the places; consequently, identical 'traditional forms or styles' from different regions were mixed and widely used; the results are cities or towns all looked similar without any identities<sup>22</sup>. There is a general agreement among the architects in the conference that rather than being designed as a showcase for the identity, Lijiang has evolved from its history and its contemporary daily life; it therefore has effectively accommodated the

tradition and contemporary requirements.

The Old Town has kept its traditional house forms and town fabric; however, the symbolic meanings of its built environment have been rewritten. The layout of the traditional courtyard houses derived its symbolic import from an agricultural cosmology with strong sense of orientation; the courtyard was enclosed for the private family life. Nowadays majority of the courtyards were modified for commercial uses such as the hotels or restaurants. The main entrances, used to be an enclosure leading to the private space, now wide open to welcome customers. After entering, the traditional sense of orientations is changed. Each of the traditional flanks used to represent a hierarchical level within the family. To be modified as hotels or restaurants, around the courtyard are equally important three flanks of the hotel rooms or dining halls.

On the high streets of the Old Town, the forms of the houses are visible but became secondary to other fixtures in visual impact. By the streets or the canals, the various fixtures - a water wheel, a wooden bridge, a small boat, red lanterns, segment of fence or shelves – substitute for the space, and reach out to the visitors visually across the canals and makes an impact that a single architecture could never make. They act as visual boosters within this space, encouraging the visitors to explore and to participate. This is different from the traditional picturesque pictures that invite people to appreciate from a distance. The colourful layers of the handmade scarves, the wooden bridges, the strings of the red lanterns, poles and opened folding walls all have spatial as well as symbolic roles.

In the Old Town, the roles of the architects and planners have been reduced to the planning control and providing guide books for the local builders. Unlike the cities that are dominated by pure architecture, most vernacular houses refurbished in Lijiang have the design decisions made by the owners and local builders. The symbolic meanings of the forms in builders' vernacular also serve to identify and support the individualism of the owners. Vernacular provides a rich vocabulary of forms and ideas. Handicraft vernacular are popular where advanced technology is far fetched for the small towns or counties. The Old Town grows through the decisions of many. The whole town is a landscape of layers of meaning evident in its fixtures, the traditional and modern merchandises, the houses, and the public squares. It was a rich mix; the mixture at a scale and a degree of complexity meet today's sensitivity and impatient pace.

### **Conclusion**

Since the 1950s, much of discussion on the traditional Chinese architecture has derived from the tension between two demands; that traditional culture should be reflected in the architecture, and that architecture should be modernised. Since architectural modernism and post-modernism movements were introduced in China in the 1980s, many new buildings in China were oversimplified referred as traditional, modern or post-modern. But one may question the Chinese meaning of 'tradition' comparing to 'modernism' and 'post-modernism'. Because much of China never went through a period of development and modernization, as in the West, the concepts and frames of reference for tradition, modernism or post-modernism are different from those in other parts of the world.

In Kunming, after the initial anxiety about the conflict between tradition and modernity, this dynamic seems to have produced a condition in which there is no clear definition of the two. And, rather than differentiate the design to be traditional or modern, or modern or post-modern, there is increasing interest in hybrid juxtapositions. In the early twenty-first century, thus, hybrid effects embed tradition in the new material environment, and therefore overcome old conflicts. More importantly, they position the city at an internationally in the global network, especially after the Kunming's role as the gateway from China to South-East Asia become increasingly important.

By contrast, in the Old Town in Lijiang, tourists confront a well-preserved traditional built environment. Yet everything there has been encoded with alternative meanings, so that the products and spaces are interpreted by the local residents and the visitors in different ways - from an emotional engagement with

the place to the exploration of what the place could represent. In this sense, the place keeps an ongoing and interactive conversation between various groups; the process changes through time, creating new ideas, social structures, and meaningful place. There can be no single authentic lingua franca in such an endeavour. Some do not like this seemingly over commercialised town, arguing that the symbols that represent the materialistic values of consumer economy contaminated the traditional tranquil environment and local people's life. This viewpoint throws out the variety with the vulgarity. As Setha Low argues that 'the global is made local through the attribution of meaning. These local spatial/cultural spaces provide the emotional and symbolic bases for maintaining cultural identity'<sup>23</sup>.

Castells argues that in the information age of the twenty-first century, the hybrid cities are made up by the intertwining of 'space of flows' and the 'space of places'<sup>24</sup>. In the development processes of Kunming city and the Old Town in Lijiang, it appears that the interaction between people and their material world has encoded the built environment with the meanings of the reinvented tradition.