

# ARTFORUM

MARCH 2014

INTERNATIONAL

LARS VON TRIER

LUCIE STAHL

TERRY ADKINS AND  
GEORGE LEWIS  
IN CONVERSATION



\$10.00



0 74470 29084 1



# Creative Commons

WINNIE WONG ON ARCHITECTURAL COPIES

IN 1749, at the height of the European mania for chinoiserie, an employee of the Swedish East India Company named William Chambers traveled to England after two voyages to the port of Guangzhou, China. His accounts of his experiences there were hungrily lapped up by the English nobility, and Chambers, building on this notoriety, soon fashioned himself into the leading architect and landscape designer of his day, notably designing the Chinese Pagoda at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, completed in 1762, and becoming master surveyor and architect to King George III. A pet project of the well-heeled naturalist and explorer Sir Joseph Banks, Kew Gardens presented a veritable encyclopedia of the vast world that the awesome military and commercial power of the British East India Company had put within reach, including plants from exotic climes and examples of the architectural styles of great civilizations, past and present, from around the globe.

Chambers boasted that his ten-story wooden Chinese Pagoda, which still stands today, was modeled on the famous Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing, built in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), though we can be quite sure that

Chambers never came anywhere near that architectural marvel. He would have known of it only through a brief description in Johan Nieuhof's chronicle of the 1655 Dutch embassy to Peking, first published in London almost a century before. Chambers probably based his design on the rather unremarkable timber tower at Whampoa Island, the swampy backwater outside the port of Guangzhou, where all European ships were obliged to anchor and await admittance into the Great Qing empire. As Chambers wrote in his treatise *Designs for Chinese Buildings* (1757), "I do not pretend to give this as a very accurate plan of that building: exact measures of Chinese structures are of small consequence to European Artists." An exact copy, it would seem, was never Chambers's goal in building his "Chinese" Pagoda. Instead, he was aiming for a more ineffable sense of stylistic resemblance and the powerful associations it conjured.

Within a hundred years, euphoric emulation turned into appetite for conquest, and the Great Qing was soon brought to heel by British might. The turmoil that followed destroyed much of the architectural heritage that had once caught Europeans' fancy; among

the countless losses was the Porcelain Pagoda itself, destroyed during the Taiping Rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet today, at the start of the twenty-first, an ascendant China is rebuilding itself in ways that have again captured the Western imagination. Much of China's new construction explicitly demonstrates a nationalistic ambition to celebrate its heritage: The Porcelain Pagoda, for example, is being rebuilt by a wealthy patron. But China is also increasingly the site of the best new work of leading European and American architects, with construction reaching a scale that no longer seems possible in the West. Urban districts throughout China have been remade in only a couple of years; an entire city of fifteen million, Shenzhen, rose

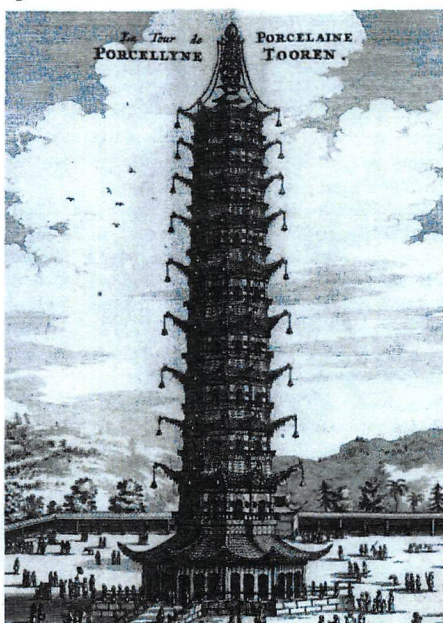
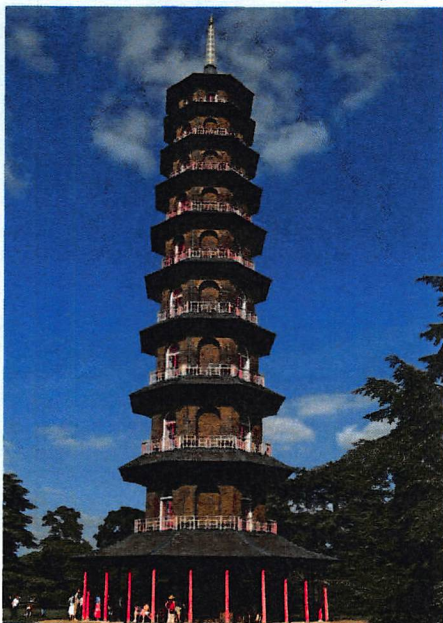
**The trend of copying buildings does not stem from an intention to literally replicate an object, but from the ambition to provide a total setting for novel, all-consuming experiences.**

from a fishing village in a mere three decades; and a thousand museums were built in the past ten years. At the same time, the eighteenth-century European craze for chinoiserie has been matched by a contemporary Chinese obsession with all things *oushi*, or Euro-styled. Just as Europeans once drank tea and waved paper fans in their Chinese rooms, wealthy Chinese today play golf, collect wine, buy oil paintings, and live in McMansions. Both types of aesthetic appropriation emphasize the exotic appeal of distance and time: In either case, the model culture is figured not only as alien and geographically remote, but as older and more established, with authentic traditions that can anchor the otherwise capricious fashions of a rapidly expanding new order.

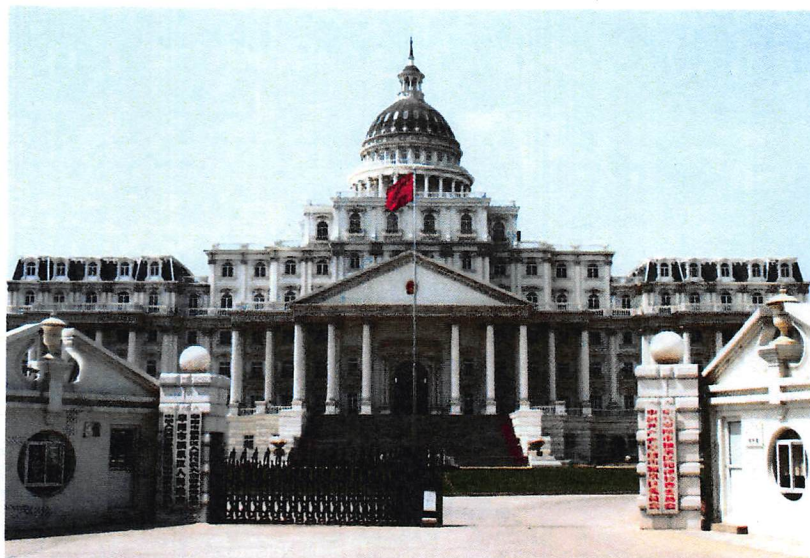
The whirlwind that is China's contemporary culture was unleashed by the reform and opening policy implemented in 1979, after the death of Mao. "Reform" here referred directly to economic reforms, the dismantling of central economic planning under the auspices of the ruling Communist Party, but the meaning of "opening" was symbolic, suggesting the ambition, after decades of gazing inward, to open metaphorical windows onto vistas of the wide world. As at Kew, this newly global outlook has been translated most spectacularly through architecture, with innumerable examples of "European" and "American" buildings and landscapes reproduced in China.

This desire to look abroad is explicitly reflected in Window of the World, a theme park built in the rapidly expanding city of Shenzhen in the early 1990s. The project bears a particularly striking resemblance to Kew Gardens, similarly serving as an experiential encyclopedia of the world's architectural and natural heritage. The forty-eight-hectare park features more than 130 replicas of global architecture radially arranged around a scaled-down Eiffel Tower. Its stunning reproductions include a roaring Niagara Falls, a windswept Sphinx

From left: Sir William Chambers, *Chinese Pagoda*, 1762, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, London. Photo: C. Lansley/Flickr. Johan Nieuhof and Jacob van Meurs, *The Porcelain Tower* (detail), 1665, engraving, 7 7/8 x 11 1/8".







Left: Government building, Fuyang, Anhui Province, China, June 28, 2008. Photo: Imaginechina/AP.

Above: Thames Town, Songjiang, Shanghai, March 8, 2009. Photo: Bricoleurbanism/Flickr.

and pyramids, and a miniaturized version of the Piazza San Marco. Like Kew, Window of the World initially served as a world-heritage primer for the ruling class. Today, reflecting rising prosperity and an increasingly cosmopolitan culture, it is a middle-class amusement park, and the replicas serve almost exclusively as backdrops for photographs, a way for domestic tourists to imagine themselves as international ones. If the park was once Shenzhen's most impressive architectural attraction, however, the city's new white skyscrapers now peek out of the background of these photos, as reality continually outstrips fantasy.

But architectural copying has by no means been limited to such oneiric spaces, as developers and architects have repeatedly borrowed Western architectural styles to attract buyers and obtain government support. Outside Beijing, there is an ostentatious hotel resort, modeled on France's Château de Maisons-Laffitte, that specializes in hosting large state functions; several adaptations of the US Capitol serve as low-level government offices (for example, in Shunde and Fuyang); and a replica of Le Corbusier's canonical Ronchamp chapel appeared in Zhengzhou, raising the ire of the Fondation Le Corbusier. This kind of ambition is not limited to the appropriation of European icons: A version of Zaha Hadid's much-anticipated Wangjing Soho mixed-use complex in Beijing is currently being built in the free-wheeling city of Chongqing, drawing outrage from the architect and her client; the beloved China National Pavilion of the Shanghai World Expo has inspired at least one performing arts center; and innumerable "Water Cubes" imitating the iconic National Aquatics Center built for the Beijing Olympics have sprung up

around the country as luxury spas. These copies capitalize on the global popularity of such landmarks, which are endlessly consumed as images by both foreign and domestic audiences. Indeed, it seems unlikely that this phenomenon of duplication would be as pervasive if famous buildings did not circulate so easily through the media. The majority of these architectural copies are drawn up by foreign and Chinese joint-partnership firms, who, like Chambers, show little concern for meticulous imitation. Instead they prefer to work from the great pattern book known as the Internet.

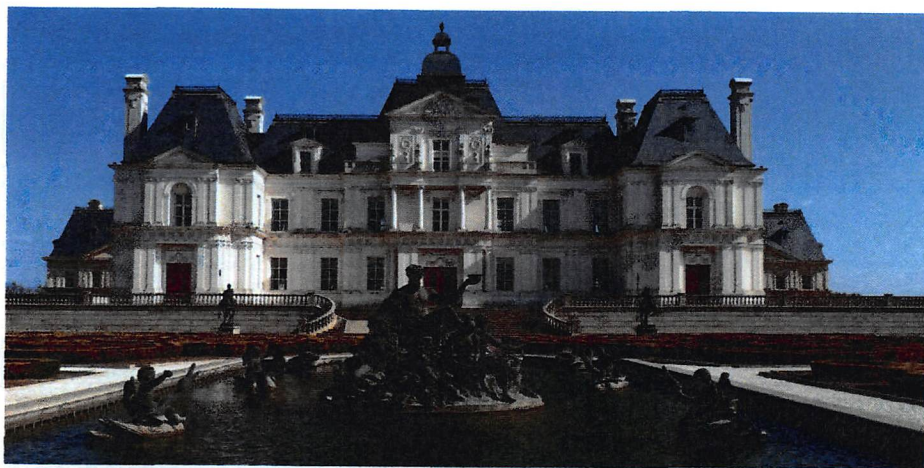
The Western response to these buildings is inevitably influenced by the ongoing furor over the stream of counterfeit goods—from handbags to DVDs—produced in China. And it can be increasingly difficult to separate the two, with architecture providing an integral component of branding strategy. In 2011, an American nurse living in Kunming posted a video on her blog documenting her visit to what appeared to be an Apple Store. She encountered floor-to-ceiling glass, rectangular pale-wood tables, employees in blue T-shirts with name tags, and a signature spiral staircase. Although there was no question that the store was selling genuine Apple products, she was scandalized to realize that it was not an "Apple Store" per se—at that time, Apple had opened "official" stores only in Beijing and Shanghai (though authorized vendors had long been operating throughout China). The American news media seemed to share the nurse's indignation, and her video and blog post went viral. Although Apple declined to comment officially on the controversy, more than a year later, in January 2013, the US Patents and Trademark Office granted Apple a trademark on the design of its

stores. The legal vehicle under which the corporation made its claim was "trade dress," which protects the "total look and feel" of its retail spaces.

Yet attempts to police such elusive criteria forget that the very notion of counterfeiting may not apply to architecture at all: Because imposter structures are rarely if ever exact replicas of an original (as demonstrated at Kew and Window of the World), and the history of the discipline itself can be understood as one long story of stylistic influence and imitation. Architecture thus resists assimilation into the legal and conceptual frameworks through which we understand the phenomenon of copying, despite the fact that its increasingly prominent role in global culture and international branding have thrust it into the center of these debates. Even in the notoriously litigious US, where there is a long tradition of intellectual-property law, it wasn't until 1990 that architecture was accorded copyright protection. For China, ascension to the World Trade Organization in 2001 required the creation of legal protections for intellectual property. But while the Western media constantly complains that infringements are not properly policed in China, this is partially because the Chinese public has far more pressing concerns than fake sneakers or pirated movies. Given the widespread fatal consequences of adulterated foods and medicines, or the fraudulently substandard construction of bullet trains and elementary school buildings, aesthetic similarities in architecture and urban design can hardly be regarded with the same alarm that they provoke in the West.

The curious story of the "fake" Apple Store selling "real" Apple goods speaks to the range of aesthetic possibilities in China; it is almost as if the notion of the





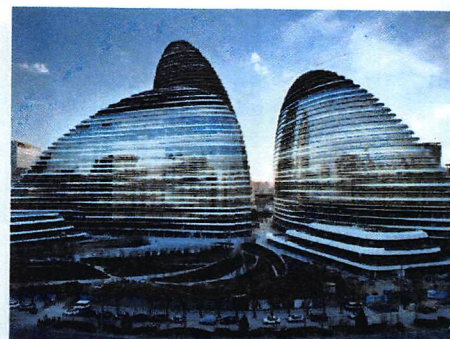
Above: Beijing Château Laffitte Hotel, April 29, 2010. Photo: Li Nenming/Imaginechina.

Left: Replica of Le Corbusier's Ronchamp chapel, Zhengzhou, Henan Province, China, 2004. Photo: Fei Wang.



Right, top: Zaha Hadid Architects' Wangjing Soho under construction, Beijing, January 2014. Photo: Soho China.

Right, bottom: Melquan 22nd Century under construction, Chongqing, China, January 6, 2013. Photo: Lao Xu/Imaginechina.



creative commons—long a crucial concept within intellectual-property law—has been embraced with unforeseen gusto and with an unprecedentedly global scope. And while a sense of cultural superiority undergirds the Western public's assumption that the Chinese want to mimic their culture exactly, the Chinese in turn call these creative appropriations *shanzhai*, a term that translates roughly as “guerrilla appropriation” and thus paints the popular practice with a patriotic, even revolutionary, edge. Such nationalistic blustering highlights the currents of contested political power that have always underpinned architectural copying.

Yet the trend, whether in Kew or Shenzhen, ultimately does not stem from an intention to literally replicate an object, but from the ambition to provide a total setting for novel, all-consuming experiences. It is, after all, the special promise of architecture to stylize life itself. It's not surprising, then, that the recent phenomenon in China has grown to the scale of whole neighborhoods. Spurred by Chinese real estate corporations and government departments undertaking vast urbanization projects with expectations of high profits, residential and mixed-use developments throughout China have been designed with European themes to maximize their cultural cachet. While often nicknamed after the

places they are said to imitate—as with Shanghai's Thames Town, Anting's German Town, Hangzhou's Venice Watertown, and Huizhou's Hallstatt—these developments are nevertheless clearly designed to provide the requisite components of Chinese urban planning: luxury villas (to be sold for maximal profit), mid- and high-rise residential complexes (to rehouse and compensate displaced residents), and institutional buildings such as art museums, hotels, and government offices (to accommodate local cultural and bureaucratic needs). Moreover, the details of such architecture rarely share much with the European vernacular, as they are precisely tailored to modern Chinese living: Apartments feature cabinets for external air-conditioning units and balcony installations to sun laundry; villas are outfitted with garden ponds that hold live fish until needed for cooking, kitchens that boast built-in steaming ovens, soundproofed rooms for karaoke, and mah-jongg spaces with automatic tables. In other words, despite superficial visual similarities, the buildings in these themed developments are not actually copies of European architecture at all: They are uniquely Chinese constructions serving a wide range of local needs across social strata.

Today, Thames Town is not only a quiet, pretty, and luxurious residential community located in the historic

Songjiang district an hour outside Shanghai's center, but also an enormously popular backdrop for wedding photography. Every day of the week, on the large lawn of the church (a stripped-down quotation of Christ Church in Clifton Down, Bristol), an endless series of couples, trailed by assistants and stylists, strike loving poses as gently instructed by their photographers. In the cobbled pedestrian streets—backstage, as it were—these wedding-photography firms provide dressing rooms filled with dozens of one-size-fits-all dresses (from traditional floor-length white frocks to miniskirts to colorful “European” ball gowns) and matching menswear, along with shelves of platform shoes, tiaras, and jewelry to complete the many borrowed looks on offer. Here, the town's buildings take their place among a plethora of lifestyle accessories, the largest of the innumerable props necessary for staging these idealized, aspirational images. Such rituals remind us of architecture's central role in an emerging global imaginary, its vital function within a type of visual play in which any number of cultures and styles can be put on and taken off like so many dresses. In this kind of fantasy, there is hardly any need for authenticity or sameness: More is simply better. □

WINNIE WONG IS ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF RHETORIC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY. SHE LIVES IN BERKELEY AND SHANGHAI.