

Towards the South : Architectural Identity Politics of Xiamen University Malaysia

Luo Jing

Central Academy of Fine Arts, China

Luo Lin

Xiamen University, China

Ke Zhennan

Xiamen University, China

Abstract

Xiamen University is the first university in China to establish a large-scale branch campus abroad. Via a research into the design of Xiamen University Malaysia (XMUM) campus, this article explores the articulation of architecture and identity on regional, political and cultural boundaries. In the Architecture literature, there is an intention to focus only on the physical locality of a place, with the social-spatial attributes of this place being ignored. This traditional approach cannot be applied directly to the architectural construction of XMUM as well as its parent university since they are frontier of Chinese ethnicity and culture, where terms such as "locality" and "self" cannot be understood in themselves anymore. To this end, this article sets up a temporal-spatial analytical framework, and uses interdisciplinary methods as ethnography, depth interview and architectural formal analysis to study the thread of architectural ideas of XMUM in regards to China's international relations and associated identity politics ascending to its parent university. Furthermore, the article examines how architecture acts as both result of and influence on the construction of identities, and how it establishes a spatial dimension of China in a global perspective, arguing that the campus is a tradeoff between the mimic of cultural tradition and the obviously alternative local spatial condition, and finally concludes that through no other than challenging the locality that architecture establishes the field of identity politics.

Research into the functional relationship between architecture and identity from a transnational and fluid perspective involves the dissemination and reshaping of a series of architectural forms, the political power dynamics and cultural blending, and the new identities continually shaped by architecture itself. The two entities intertwine across the geographical, political, and cultural boundaries of the two countries, leaving themselves in a perpetual process of "becoming," and of redefining the boundaries.

To a considerable extent, reflections on locality in architecture is bound with specific sites. Issues such as responses to materiality, constructedness, and spatiality, and imaginings of history and tradition are often limited to a site with clear boundaries. Such limitations offer a response to the fundamental problem of the site, but often neglect the social-spatial thickness deriving from human and social mobility in space. However, transnational mobility pushes our research perspective toward a murky and dynamic zone, and consequently we must confront situations where the subjects of identity are constantly placed in the conflicts between the native and the foreign, between the official and the non-official, and between spirituality and materiality. Forms of architecture no longer correspond to the historical particularity of a specific place, but rather become a component of the political relationship between the "self" and the "other."

Through researching the design of the Malaysia campus of Xiamen University, this paper aims to offer a critical account of its relationship to a host of issues such as the history of Xiamen University's investment and construction in Southeast Asia, the inheritance of architectural

culture, local political and cultural situations in Malaysia, and characteristics of the site. In so doing, this paper reflects on the locality of architecture, and how locality intersects with identity politics.

In the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese universities have actively pursued overseas expansion in response to China's strategy of "Going Global" designed to increase the country's influence. Against this background, Xiamen University became the first comprehensive university to establish an overseas campus (Guo, 2018). This trend has added a new orientation of "going out of the country" for research into Chinese architecture and space with a global view. As a case study in a global context, Xiamen University accords great depth, because the "transnational" process meant not only going out of China and into Malaysia, but it also must be traced back to a historical development directly related to this act, that of Tan Kah Kee, a Chinese Singaporean who returned to China to found the university. This thread, dating back to more than 100 years ago when capital and post-colonial ideas were imported from Southeast Asia, connects with the present when an educational institution is exported to Malaysia, and stretches the temporal dimension of this research project.

Xiamen University Campus: Southeast Asia, Western or Local, What is the Identity?

Xiamen University was founded and built by Tan Kah Kee. Tan was born in Jimei village in Tung An District, Fujian Province in 1873. When he was seventeen, Tan joined his father in the family business in Southeast Asia. He joined the Chinese Revolutionary League to support the Revolution of 1911, and started to fund schools in Xiamen in 1913. Before laying his eyes on the design for Xiamen University, Tan had already established as well as "designed" the campuses for Jimei School (1913), Jimei Normal School and Jimei Secondary School (1918), and Jimei Aquatic, Navigation and Business Colleges (1919—1921). Through all the practices of building schools, Tan Kah Kee the entrepreneur and educator had already made himself a quasi-architect.

The "self" is essential to the Xiamen University campus buildings. In the speech Tan Kah Kee made on 13 July 1919 in the Tan Ancestral Hall

located on the Floating Island of Xiamen, Tan said: "With the nation in grave danger, the only resources we could rely on to survive are our emergent educational endeavor and our people's morale that refuses to be discouraged. (Chen, 1980)." Xiamen University was founded during the national crisis, bearing the wishes for national revival and construction of a national identity: "We must preserve our nation's culture and spirit in their entirety...And we need to devote everything we have to education, which is the only hope left for our nation in the days to come.....If we rely on foreigners to finance China's education, it would be as shameful and pathetic as asking someone else to pay for your own children's education. (Tan, 1946:4)"

This architectural "self" was handed over to Henry Murphy, an American architect adaptive to China, to construct. Before meeting with Tan Kah Kee in 1919, he had already designed campuses for College of Yale-in-China (1914), Tsinghua College (1914), Private Fudan University (1918), Ginling College (1919) and Yenching University (1919), etc. Murphy brought up the "adaptive architecture" theory and boasted an organic integration of traditional Chinese architectural culture and Western classical architectural styles. When he was commissioned to draft a plan for Tsinghua in 1914, he paid his first visit to the Forbidden City, which he claimed as "the best building complex in the world". From then on, thick and stately traditional Chinese roofs were transplanted to almost all the Chinese universities he designed. By contrast, public schools in China mostly adopted western architectural styles at that period. As for the campus planning, Murphy conceived his own mission as bringing advanced Western concepts of campus planning to the then underdeveloped construction of Chinese universities. His plans for Yale-in-China, Tsinghua and Fudan mostly copied Thomas Jefferson's model for University of Virginia—a U-shaped mall with a wide rectangle lawn in the center and the main building at one end. The same combination was also used in the master plan and drawings of Qunxian Building submitted by Murphy, which is the first building group of Xiamen University. Murphy's mall included a north-south axis with the same number of buildings symmetrically located on both sides facing east and west and the main building facing south, enclosing a rectangle yard in the middle.

However, On 6 April 1921, the founding day of Xiamen University, Tan Kah Kee perused the master plan and drawings of “Qunxian Building” submitted by Murphy, paid him the “astronomical” commission fee of USD 1,500 and turned down his plan, commenting that “I cannot agree with (Murphy’s plan) because it was a failure in fine arts and messed up again in terms of orientation. The layout (he designed) suffers from a strong western exposure and misses the benefit of a favorable south wind. (Tan, 1923).” Then Tan Kah Kee brought up his own design: with their back towards the mountain the buildings would spread out on a straight line all facing south where the ocean is. For considerations on usage, the plan spared the only piece of comparatively even ground on the south, reserving for future sporting or ceremonial events and becoming a façade to civilians. For considerations on formal significance of main buildings, the primary was “the gate of Xiamen University shall be an unavoidable sight for all the ships coming to or leaving Xiamen either from or for Southeast Asia, Europe, America and the Northeast Sea of China (Tan, 1946:23).” It was a manifest of the “self”. Besides, Tan’s plan shared the same axis with the millennium-old South Putuo Temple, the architectural style was a mixture of western main body and Chinese roof. Different from Murphy’s design, instead of copying the model of the Forbidden City, the roofs of Tan Kah Kee’s Qunxian Complex were an adapted version of the Hall of Great Compassion in South Putuo Temple, which was built during Emperor Kangxi’s reign with resting hill, double eaves, and upturned eaves – and the Great

Compassion was the favorite building in southern Fujian with authentic Chinese style in the community of foreigners frequenting the Xiamen Port since the city was allowed to do international trade (Figure 1). On one hand, as an oversea-Chinese, Tan Kah Kee adored the western university campuses for they were the place of origin of university education; on the other hand, as a local of Xiamen, he appreciated local tradition rather than state tradition, and used the local as a symbol of nation.

In fact, facing south where the ocean is was the primary terms when it came to the choice of site for Xiamen University. In 1919, together with Huang Yuanpei, a fellow member of “Tung Meng Hui”, Tan Kah Kee selected a piece of land located at the southern end of Xiamen Island which is across the sea from his hometown Jimei, to the south of the Wanshi Mountain and South Putuo Temple at the foot of the mountain, and to the north of Xiamen Port. And Yanwu Playground, where Koxinga used to train his soldiers, appeared as the “perfect spot” for Tan. As the saying goes, the residents of southern Fujian have always cast their sight and forged their souls towards the south, where there are more sunshine and favorable winds that could blow away the most heat. It has been not only a natural choice but also an integral part of the cultural psychology of the residents of southern Fujian. Tan made sure that all the buildings he created, including his old residence, the graveyard he built for himself, and the series of Jimei Schools and Colleges he had started to establish since 1913, were facing south where the ocean is (Figure 2). Based on

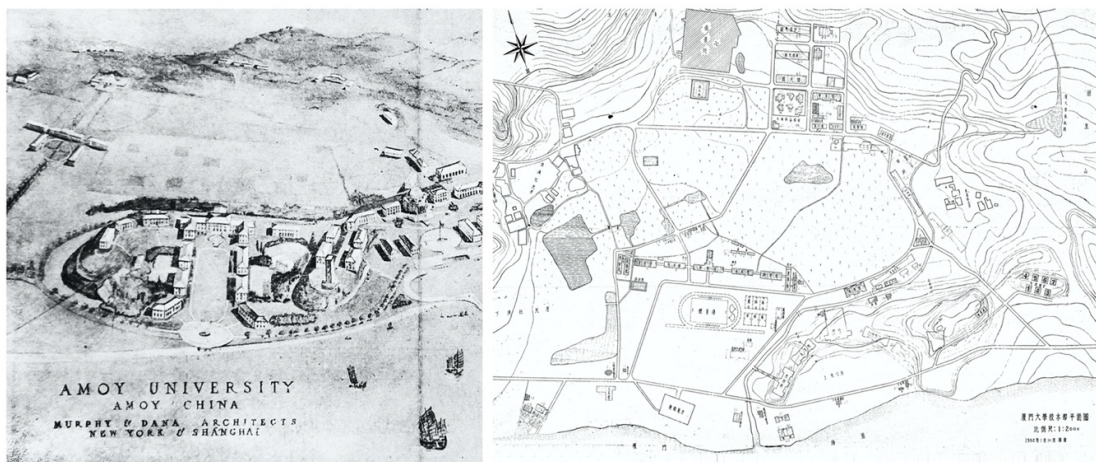


Figure 1. Murphy’s plan vs. the layout of Xiamen University in 1952 following Tan’s plan. Xiamen University History Museum.

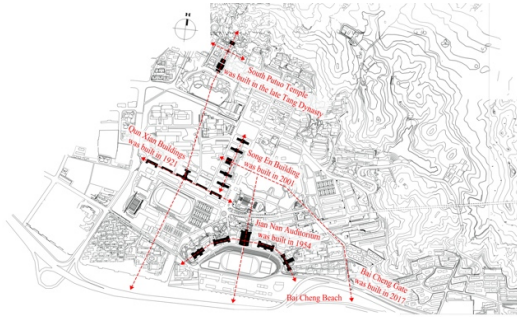


Figure 2. The south-north axis of the campus.
Drawn by the Author.

this determining factor, the design for Xiamen University was ultimately apart from the western campus design. When Lu Xun held a faculty job at Xiamen University in 1926, he wrote Xu Guangping a letter (later included in Letters between Two) in which he described the campus as “erecting a row of Western-style houses right by the coastline on a desolate island”.

Xiamen University Malaysia: Traditional or Local, How to Identify?

On 28 February 2012, Xiamen University formally announced that it would establish a Malaysia Campus in Kuala Lumpur. The then President Zhu Chongshi believed that “it would be a historical present in return for Xiamen University to establish a branch campus in Malaysia where Mr. Tan Kah Kee made a significant part of his fortune.” (Guo, 2018)

Before XMUM was founded, the Malaysian government invited three Australian and six British universities to establish branch campuses in various Malaysian states. These initiatives were based on a strategic plan called “the International Education Base of Asia,” which started around 1990. The 1990s were an era during which the Malaysian economy began looking for new pathways rather than selling traditional natural resources. The increase of international student flows into Malaysia over the years has proven the plan’s effectiveness in the context of the growing competition of the global education market (Guo, 2018). For China, the Malaysian project was part of a wider Chinese push for global influence known as Beijing’s “going global” strategy. By opening campuses abroad, “these universities hope to enhance their overseas influence and to compete in international higher education. And the government thinks it is good way to export Chinese soft power,” said Xiong who was also the vice-president of China’s 21st Century Education Research Institute¹. In a word, the context of building the XMUM was completely different from – even on the contrary of – the building of the Xiamen University (XMU).

Kota Warisan was selected as the site to build the campus that covers 150 acres of land with a high voltage corridor (72 m in width and 40 m in height) to the north and a planned commercial district to the east which is located alongside the light rail connecting the airport and downtown Kuala Lumpur and close to Salak Tinggi

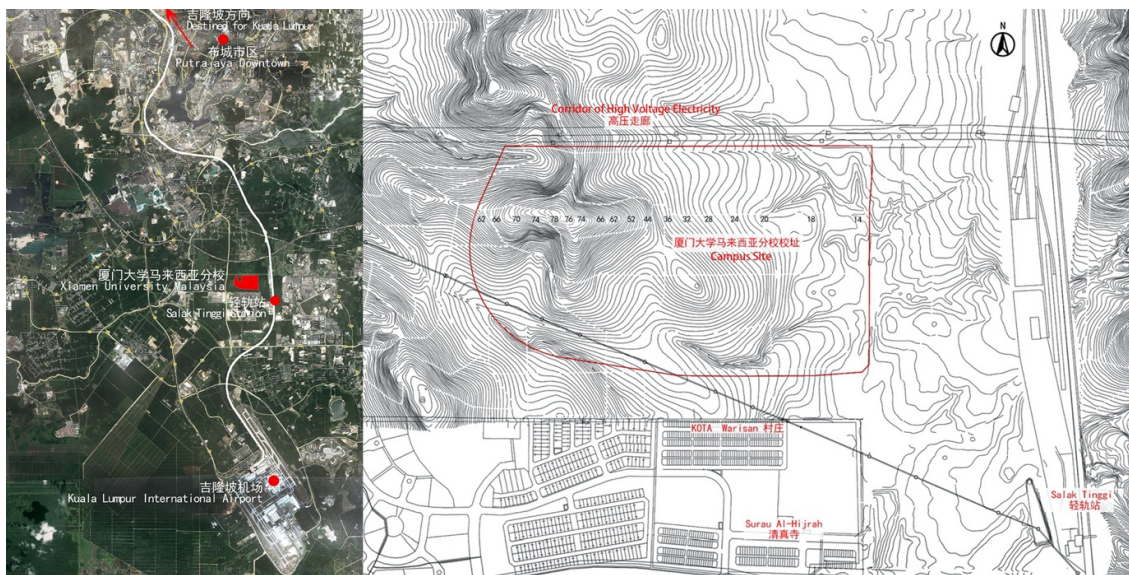


Figure 3. Site Location and Map. Drawn by the author.

Station. To the west of the campus sits a mountain which creates a 67-meters altitude difference within the campus. And the piece of land is also wider across east and west (Figure. 3). Based on these facts, the initial plans were all to adopt an east-west axis with a straight line of

Main Building Complex facing east where the traffic is oriented. In this way the campus would run parallel with the densely populated villages to the south and the high voltage corridor to the north, thereby reducing sight line interference. (Figure 4)

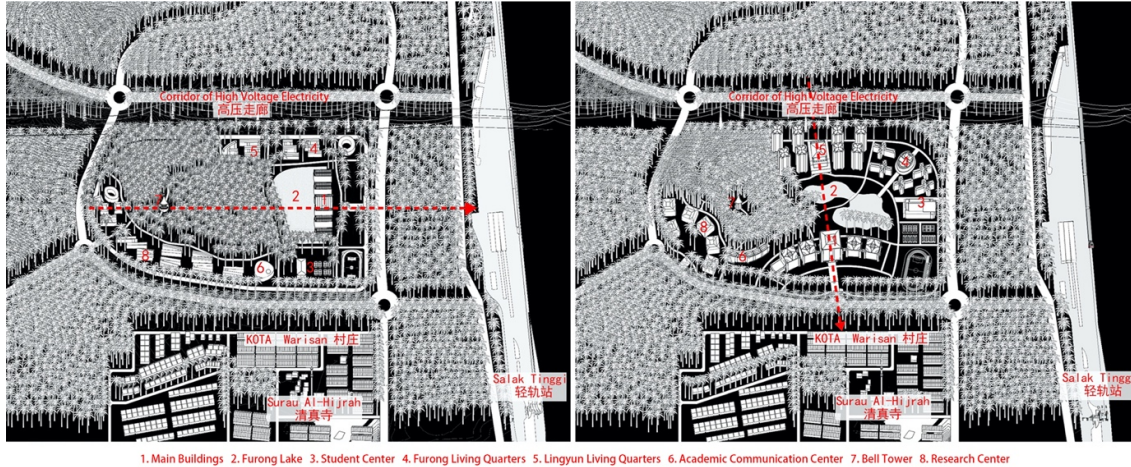


Figure 4. The East-West Plan vs. the North-South Plan. Drawn by the author.

The Analytical Perspective: The Space-Time of Architecture

Undoubtedly, the immobility of architecture easily sets a trap for any research into its development and continuation. For the sake of argument, let us call it site determinism. The concept of space is rigidly limited to a site, as the social scope is confined to the history of this site. In fact, in the cases of architectural design for Xiamen University itself and for its Malaysia campus, we can examine an important phenomenon: the particular spatial-temporal relationship that is formed in the process wherein the relative fixedness of site as entity merges with the relative mobility of human beings as dynamic existence.

Architecture can be said to exist in given natural, social, and cultural customs. This concept refers not only to the physical environment – which is often the specific basis of all customs – but rather it emphasizes the effects of mobile people. On one hand, history combines with space to constitute tradition; on the other, the history of architecture is not constrained to take place only on particular sites. In addition to the natural ocean island conditions of Xiamen and the proximity to the South Putuo Temple, the customs of the architecture of Xiamen

University also include the post-colonial legacy from the West, and the historical convergence of Southeast Asian capital and the locally-nationally oriented mindset of overseas Chinese. The Malaysia campus takes the history of the University home campus across the ocean to a foreign land. By this time, such internalized ideas as the West, Southeast Asia, and the native land have all become “the self,” and the site of the architecture itself has in turn become “the other.” The resistance to the local climate and site conditions offered by the form of the Malaysia campus’ architecture is, in essence, the conflict between the self and the other.

Therefore, compared with locality, historicity and regionality provide us with an alternative analytical perspective, helping us to see the multi-faceted subjectivity behind the form of architecture. To limit time to a fixed space is to deprive time of its own agency. From a global perspective, the analytical framework of space-time seeks to capture and understand the dynamic and fluid nature of the interaction between architecture and society. As Bruno Latour reminds us, “Flying is a property of the association of entities that includes airports and planes, launch pads and ticket counters. B-52’s do not fly, the U.S. Air Force lies.” (Latour, 1999:182) By the same token, the Malaysia Campus was not designed by architects or any

commissioning party, but rather by the local natural and political conditions, the Chinese political circumstances, the home campus, and all the policymakers involved, an assembly that contains both human and non-human agents.



Figure 5. The Completed Main Buildings.
Photo by Luo Lianbi.

Conclusion: The Politics of Architecture

In geography, the prevailing perspective holds fluid space as a key component in the parallel analysis of urban socio-political conditions. But on the other hand, analysis of the individuality and the separateness of spatial form – that is to say, its absoluteness – is crucial to improving our understanding and knowledge of the physical urban space. Given that spatial structures can be specific demonstrations of social structures and relationships, we can then argue that social praxis and spatial praxis most clearly intersect on the level of form, and that historical momentum and the contents of urban societies and cultures are engraved in the physical form and the everyday life of the city itself. (Banik-Schweitzer and Blau, 2003)

In the case studied in this paper, how, based on the space-time framework, has the architectural form connected with particular identities? The home campus of Xiamen University was founded in a time of national crisis, and the Malaysia campus entertained hopes of “exporting China’s soft power.” Both were attempts to interpret the idea of the Chinese nation, but each gave rise to a different relationship between architecture and locality due to different power dynamics: Murphy, coming from the U.S. as the Western “other,” brought a more “advanced” layout plan

disconnected from the local natural environment, and a style that featured official Chinese architecture, also disconnected from the local culture. As a result, his design was rejected by Tan Kah Kee, who travelled frequently between the site and Southeast Asia. Tan Kah Kee, for his part, took advantage of the south-facing and ocean-facing culture in southern Fujian province, as well as the plan that shares the same axis with the South Putuo Temple. At the same time, he created a hybrid style that had western architectural elements, based on the Southeast Asian post-colonial idea that universities originated in the West. As for the Malaysia campus, what dominated the local site was the ideology of the home campus and the form of “Tan Kah Kee Architecture.”

Therefore, from the angle of material space, architectural forms provide us with a spatial avenue to, and means of revealing and delineating the conflictual relationship between subjects. We have seen how form challenges the extant space-time, shapes new space-time, and thereby constructs new identities. Because architecture has a fixed, inseparable connection to its site, it is precisely through challenging locality that architectural forms create a field of identity resistance, thus acquiring a political dimension.

Bibliography

1. 陳嘉庚，南僑回憶錄，新嘉坡南洋印刷社，1946
2. 陳進發，戰前的陳嘉庚言論史料與分析，南洋學會，南洋印務（私人）有限公司，1980。
3. 陳嘉庚先生致林文庆-陈延庭函汇集（第二册）1923.2-11，集美校委会资料室藏
4. Banik-Schweitzer, Renate, and Eve Blau. "Urban Form." Städtebau in der postfordistischen Gesellschaft, Wien (2003).
5. Cody, Jeffrey W. Building in China: Henry K. Murphy's adaptive architecture, 1914-1935. Chinese University Press, 2001.
6. Jie, Guo. "Xiamen University Malaysia: A Chinese Branch Campus." International Higher Education 95 (2018): 9-11.
7. Latour, Bruno. "On recalling ANT." The Sociological Review 47.1_suppl (1999): 15-25.