Book Review


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In the discourse of the civilizing mission, colonial intervention has traditionally been justified on the grounds that non-European nations must be saved from their own lethargy, at best, and barbarism, at worst. The claim that these nations cannot themselves be historical agents, or produce their own versions of cultural and technological modernity, rests on the premise that they are fundamentally incapable of innovation and originality. Postcolonial critique has often taken as a point of departure the demonstration of the role of this ideology in suppressing indigenous struggles for independence and equality.¹

But what, then, are the politics of a situation where a developing country explicitly endeavors to copy the West? In *Original Copies: Architectural Mimicry in Contemporary China*, Bianca Bosker offers an intriguing response to this perennial question. Bosker seeks to account for the vast number of new suburban developments that, over the past two decades in China, have been designed as replicas of European and American towns. Often reported as a novelty in feature journalism but rarely subjected to rigorous analysis, China’s architectural reproductions come into sharp focus through Bosker’s careful documentation of the genesis, appearance, and varied domestic reception of these curious residential complexes, which is supplemented with interviews with the sales personnel and inhabitants, and numerous photographs often taken by the author herself. These “simulacrascapes,” as Bosker calls them, have generally been met with perplexity and scorn by foreign onlookers, who condemn them as
expressions of China’s slavish glorification of the West and laziness in developing its own architectural idiom. Rejecting such accusations of lack of creativity and resignation to a sense of cultural inferiority, Bosker proposes that “in the way it copies the West, contemporary China manifests its tremendous originality.”

Bosker pursues this argument, in the first three chapters, by placing concepts of originality and reproduction in historical and cultural context, in order to demonstrate that China’s architectural mimicry is symptomatic not of a crisis of identity, but rather of the active construction of a new identity. In the remainder of the book, she investigates what Chinese simulacraascapes reveal about China’s evolving self-image.

Chapter 1 situates contemporary China’s architectural replicas in a longer history of cross-cultural appropriation, both globally (the transplanting of the Gothic architecture of Oxford and Cambridge onto America’s Ivy League campuses, for example) and in China specifically, starting in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) with tombs that reveal traces of Roman influence. Chapter 2 examines traditional principles of Chinese art and monumental architecture in order to reframe the question of incorporating artefacts from foreign cultures. In this key chapter, Bosker argues that to privilege originals over copies is a Western rather than Chinese value, such that “[w]hat may seem on the surface as a form of self-colonization or ‘West worship’ is actually, to the Chinese, an assertion of Chinese supremacy.”

Chapter 3 compares numerous Western-themed residences across China, highlighting both their degree of immersive dépaysement—the ways they cultivate exotic atmospheres and lifestyles alongside foreign architectural forms—and their accommodation of principles of fengshui and aspects of the traditional Chinese home, such as an inner courtyard, and additional rooms to accommodate extended family and live-in help. Bosker concludes that, in shaping these culturally hybrid residences, “Chinese homeowners have begun to map out … their ideal of the ‘new’ Chinese in the post-Mao era as a synergy of East and West.” Chapters 4 and 5 explore the implications of this idea, asking what exactly we learn about the aspirations of China’s rising middle
class—and also the Chinese state, which underwrites many of these ventures—by analyzing the architectural models they choose to imitate. The concluding chapter attends to the emergence of a new architectural idiom that marries traditional Chinese forms with the clean geometries of the International Style and eco-conscious engineering, indicating that the duplication of Western architecture may well be a passing phase.

The boldest and most fascinating claim of *Original Copies* is that, for the Chinese, the hierarchy of original and copy does not exist. Pointing to the nuanced categories in Chinese art for describing and evaluating forgeries, Bosker suggests that the practice of copying is traditionally prized as a demonstration of technical skill. Moreover, not only is the *production* of high quality copies considered a legitimate artistic endeavor, but the *reception* of these copies should also be understood in terms of an aesthetic experience that enables communion with the original. Bosker draws from a foundational text for Chinese art theory, Zong Bing’s “Preface on Painting Mountains and Water,” which discusses the way artistic representation can capture the essence of the natural world. From this she surmises that in traditional Chinese art theory, “[a] good simulacrum—one that manages to capture the essence of the original—will be imbued with a ‘life force,’ or *qi*, making the sign a perfect substitute for the ‘original’ referent.” In other words, to the Chinese, originals and copies exist on the same ontological plane.

It seems rather a stretch, however, to compare landscape painting with the physical duplication of architecture—that is, an artistic representation of nature with a mechanical reproduction of something man-made. Similarly, while reproductions may be celebrated as feats of technical skill, the question of creative expression or formal innovation remains unaddressed. These inconsistencies point to a basic slippage in the notion of originality in *Original Copies*; Bosker sets out to argue for China’s originality in its approach to duplication, but then exchanges everything we might associate with originality for the notion of mastery.
The implications of this slippage become most apparent when Bosker attends to the significance of copying artefacts specifically from foreign cultures. Her discussion centres on the imperial garden, a Chinese monumental form dating from the third century BCE. The replication in these gardens of iconic landscapes from distant lands, along with the inclusion of their distinctive flora and fauna, functioned to proclaim the breadth of the emperor’s dominion. Copying the foreign here is not so much an act of homage as one of cannibalism; the foreign is miniaturized, contained, and thus mastered. The imperial garden’s strategy of reducing the foreign to a series of tropes is clearly at work in some contemporary simulacrascapes. An English-themed suburb of Shanghai, “Thames Town,” features not only brick façades and Tudor houses, but also red telephone booths, a statue of Winston Churchill, and security guards dressed like the Queen’s Guard at Buckingham Palace; clearly the provincial British town is not so much reproduced there as distilled into signifiers of “Britishness.” Because the mode of replication is not slavish but selective (one might say consumerist) and caricatures the exotic in the manner of a theme park, Bosker suggests that, for the Chinese, copying the West is a sign of mastery rather than of submission.

Yet, as Bosker argues in later chapters, it is clear that European and American cultural tropes function not merely as symbols of the exotic, but also of prosperity, sophistication, power—and even modernity, despite the overwhelming popularity of Western period architecture over modern styles. Foreign-themed housing has dominated the real estate market precisely because it resonates with the aspirations of contemporary China.

In order to maintain that the Chinese want not to be Westernized but simply modernized, Bosker ultimately universalizes a certain notion of cultural modernity: “They [the Chinese] are behaving in ways similar to their Western counterparts not because they want to be Western but because they are, and want to enjoy being rich, and customs such as drinking fine wines or living in large homes go hand in hand with privilege.” But if the terms of cultural advancement have
already been set by the West, then what possibilities truly remain for originality in China’s approach to appropriation?

Notwithstanding these sometimes problematic claims about originality, Bosker’s interpretation of China’s architectural mimicry as an expression of power is extremely compelling. So, too, is her conclusion that China’s architectural mimicry represents a preparatory moment of apprenticeship and experimentation, rather than a sign of creative exhaustion.

Original Copies is an insightful account of the rise of consumer society in China and its impact on the elaboration of contemporary Chinese identity, and inspires curiosity and optimism about what is yet to come.

Notes

1 In the context of struggles for decolonization in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, respectively, see Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, How to Read Donald Duck, and Edward Said, Orientalism.

2 Bianca Bosker, Original Copies: Architectural Mimicry in Contemporary China (Honolulu: University Of Hawai’i Press; Hong Kong: University Of Hong Kong Press, 2013), 7.

3 Ibid., 16.

4 Ibid., 55.

5 Ibid., 27.

6 Ibid., 66.