“Jerusalem” of China: The Neoteric Christian Churches in Shaanxi before 1949

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Abstract: Christian buildings in Shaanxi already have more than 1,300 years development history since the first church was built in Chang'an in 635 AD. The Rapid development of Christian buildings started from 1840 due to the entry of foreign missionaries. Various types of Christian buildings rose up in the province, were constructed by local builder, but designed and funded by foreign missionaries. In comparison to other Christian buildings, churches have unique historical value, cultural value and also special meaning in architecture art. However, their cultural heritage value has not yet been sufficiently considered. They are facing the prospect of being damaged and demolished, even in nowadays. It is incumbent that their architecture to be historically evaluated and that ways to be found to preserve them. In this paper, the author will focus on the neoteric Christian churches and illustrate the architecture by taking examples from the churches in Shaanxi, along with the intention to clarify the relationship between social background and the history of evolution of these churches. In addition, the authors have taken the chance to understand more comprehensively about the fascinating history of these Christian churches by way of field surveys and taping into archival documents.

Key words: Shaanxi neoteric history, Christian churches, architectural style, heritage value.

1. Introduction

In 781, the Nestorian Stele was erected in Daqinsi in Chang'an and documented 150 years of early Christianity in northern China. Daqinsi is the first recorded Nestorian Christian church in China, said to have been founded by the Christian missionary Alopen in 635 AD [1]. At that time, Chang'an was not only the capital city of Tang Dynasty but also the “holy city” for Chinese Christians. However, in ancient China, the gate towards Christianity, in the full sense, has not been opened by just a few scattered Christian missionary activities. In that period, only a small number of churches have been built. Nevertheless, they were disappeared after a period of time and only can be quested through some frescoes, pictures and ancient books. They are not discussed here.

The paper focuses on Shaanxi's neoteric Christian churches because the situation has been changed completely around 1840 after the inflow of gunboats

and opium from western countries. The connection between China and western world stimulated the development of Christianity in China [1]. The culture of Christianity started spreading over China gradually, from coastal to inland cities, Shaanxi is a typical example. As the increase of missionary activities, more and more churches, Christian hospitals and schools were built in Shaanxi. Those buildings were constructed by local builder, but designed and funded by foreign missionaries. According to the statistics [2], there were eight parishes, approximately 116,000 Catholics, more than 500 clergies and 372 Catholic churches by the end of 1949. Some of these buildings still can be seen in Shaanxi.

As the special building style, churches have extremely important value to the architecture history. However, their cultural heritage value has not yet been sufficiently considered. Large numbers of Christian buildings were destroyed and disappeared forever due to early wars, political errors of the Culture Revolution during 1960s and immoderate land resources utilization, etc. Perhaps, all these Christian buildings

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which still “alive” are now still confronted with the destiny of being poorly protected and ruined finally. This will eventually lead to the permanent loss of their historical and culture value. Thus, it is incumbent that their architecture to be historically evaluated and that ways to be found to preserve them.

Thus, the authors, investigated the remaining neoteric Christian churches since 2005 and found 13 churches built before 1949 were still existing which include 10 Catholic churches, 3 Protestant churches.¹ However, the Orthodox churches are different from other Christian churches in architectural style and have less influence on the development history of neoteric church buildings in Shaanxi, so they are not within this paper’s research scope. The word “Christianity”, in this paper, is general term for Catholicism and Protestantism.

Christian churches built at the end of the Qing Dynasty in Shaanxi have been studied by a few researchers such as Yang Haozhong, but the results of their studies on “architectural history in modern China” have not yet been published. First of all, this paper intends to shed light on both the historical development and current status of the existing church buildings in Shaanxi Province which were built before 1949 by way of field surveys and through archival documents.

This assignment studies the neoteric Christian churches built in Shaanxi before 1949 which is an important period for Chinese architectural history. The process of its development and achievement in architecture is a strong reflection of cultural exchange. Christian churches may be treated as the foundation and symbol of western civilization, as well as the sparkle from the collision between two different civilizations, whereas its existence is most telling witness of culture exchange between Orient and Occident. For long stretches of history, the popularization of Christianity has gone through lots of

up-and-down overall, but the development of Christian churches in Shannxi has barely been interrupted. As such continuity, it seemly showed much more fascination in developing line of Christian churches. However, the development of Christian churches was stopped in 1949 since the Communist Party became the main government controlling party and established the People’s Republic of China in mainland China. The continuation was broken by the change of new thought (Chinese Government pushes Marxism and antitheism, so religions were no longer playing an important role in Chinese people’s daily life). Whereas, all of above made the existing neoteric Christian churches like pearls scattered in somewhere of Shaanxi, puny and fantasy next to the mighty skyscrapers. And when gazing out these forgotten churches, they seemly stir in us with complex emotion. Thus, the remaining modern Christian buildings built before 1949 have become much more precious and valuable cultural heritage.

2. The Architectural Features of Christian Churches and Sample Analysis

The neoteric Christian churches in Shaanxi fall into three main categories: One was late Italian Baroque such as Wuxingjie Catholic Church (also called The St. Francis Cathedral of Xi’an) which was introduced to China by the Italian friars preachers; Another was Gothic style. The Tanjiaping Catholic Church and the Ganguyi Catholic Church are typical examples in this category; The third type is traditional Chinese style, like Nanxinjie Church.

2.1 Italian Baroque Style—Wuxingjie Catholic Church

Wuxingjie Catholic Church, Xi’an, is also known as the South Church because of its location in the city. It was originally built in 1716 after Anto Laghi Bishop of Franciscan Order arrived in Xi’an and was rebuilt many times by Franc Saraceni Bishop, who was a Franciscan missionary.² In 1758, the emperor of the

¹ Shaanxi Provincial Bureau of Cultural Heritage and Northwestern Polytechnical University. 2014. “The Spreading of Christianity and the Introduction of Modern Architecture in Shannxi, China (1840-1949).”

²Xi’an Archives. 2000. *The Investigation Report of Catholic in Xi’an*.

Qing dynasty—Qian-long enacted edicts for banning Christianity [3]. This church was kept under sequestration until 1884 [4].

The Wuxingjie Catholic Church was expanded in 1892, up to 12 bays. The total area of the church is about 700 m². It was closed in 1966 and reopened in 1980. During the period of Cultural Revolution, this church was wrecked a lot. After the repair in 1984, the inside structure and decoration returned to its original features, but the facade was changed critically.³ Apart from this renovation, this church also went through repairing works twice which were carried on in 1990 and 2004. As a result, this building is still in good condition up to now. The plan of church is basilica and remains three span, which is the most preserved church in northwest of China and has a seating capacity of 350.

The south facade of the Wuxingjie Catholic Church shows some traditional Chinese details, but it is in strong early Jesuit Baroque style which was flanked by two wings with Chinese motifs in carved brickwork, as shown in Fig. 1. It was divided into three bays, with 20-m wide, 3.5-m deep and 17.4-m height. The facade has superimposed arcades, and two attached Corinthian columns between each square brick piers. There is a big clock in the central wall under the gable. The walls of cyan bricks are laid on plinths of bluish-grey granite and decorated with carvings and moldings. The east and west facade, on the other hand, are with timber and brick in typical Chinese traditional style, though with western details (the windows have arched semicircular heads).

The nave, which is 20-m long, 14-m deep and 22-m high, together has aisles, three bays and a parapet-gable roof, as shown in Fig. 2. The semicircular arches, are supported by columns standing in the middle of the nave and aisles. The wooden columns of the hall are hidden within each brick column to support the eaves. The wooden semicircular arches are used on the ceiling of the nave.

³The inscription in Wuxingjie Catholic Church records.

2.2 Gothic Style

2.2.1 Tanjiaping Catholic Church

In 1900, by escaping from the chase and capture of the Boxer Rebellion, the Italian priest Sun bumped along the way from Shaanxi Province to a small village in Jia County, called Tanjiaping [1]. It was the first time that Catholicism launched in the northern part of Shaanxi and started growing since after.

In February, 1909, the Spanish priest Nicolas Nieto came to Tanjiaping and began to build up churches. Unfortunately, he died of typhoid on July 5, 1910, only 15 months later since the construction started, but the building process of the church was not stopped. Spanish priest Wei Xiangque then took over the duty and supervised the construction until it was finally finished in 1912, as shown in Fig. 3 [5].

The church is in Gothic style as a whole with stone arch structure and combined with the typical residential cave dwelling, located in the north of Shaanxi. The longitudinal axis is along the east-west direction with the facade facing the east. The whole building is 15.8-m long and 15.2-m wide, as shown in Fig. 4. The middle cave has been used as the church and is connected with the caves on the south and north. The nave, has three bays and is 15.8-m long, 6.6-m wide and 10-m high, with a double pitched roof. The main entrance is on the east while the altar is located on the west. There is a second entrance on the south connecting to the cave, also used as sacerdotal residence. The cave located on the south contains six small caves which are arranged in two floors and have the flat roof of them. The L shaped stairs on the east of the caves leads to the ground. The cave on the north has three caves in one row and covered by flat roof.

The facade of the church does not display any traditional Chinese details. It is in the strong Gothic style. Two sets of brick towers with different height are erected on both sides of the main entrance, which are 14-m and 10-m high. The gate and windows have special Gothic style pointed arches feature. The traditional horizontal inscribed board, doves and plants

Fig. 1 The south facade of Wuxingjie Catholic Church.

Fig. 2 The plan of the Wuxingjie Catholic Church.

Fig. 3 The Tanjiaping Catholic Church along the Yellow River.

Fig. 4 Plan of the Tanjiaping Catholic Church.

patterns were used as detailed decoration. Even though the church shows a strong Gothic taste in many aspects, the cave dwelling and the decoration have already mixed with the local characteristic of itself after a long time.

2.2.2 Ganguyi Catholic Church

The Ganguyi Catholic Church is located Baota District of Yan'an City. The Catholic was brought here in 1911. A Spanish priest whose Chinese name was Pingjing An bought up an area about 33,000 m² and began to build the Ganguyi Catholic Church from 1931 and the construction process lasted three years [5].

The church is facing south, 16-m wide, 31-m long. It has a rectangular plan with outward arch shape altar on the north end. The facade is composed by three vertical parts: The two aisles on the side and the bell tower in the middle. The elevation of the aisles was completely symmetrical and each one was divided into two parts with pointed arch underneath. Also, it has triangle pediment above with rose shaped blank window engraved with traditional Chinese plants decoration. Two spires were located on each side of the pediment, as shown in Fig. 5.

The elevation of the bell tower is in the center of the composition, which has been divided into three roughly

equaled parts. The bottom part is the main entrance of the church which is a three layer concave pointed arch gate. The middle part has three concave pointed windows and the horizontal inscribed board. The upper part is a hexagonal bell tower, which has pointed arch windows with shutter and decorated cornice, as shown in Fig. 6.

It can be easily found that stone is the main building material used throughout the whole brick wood structured construction. The indoor space of the church contains the central hall, two aisles and the bell tower. The semicircular altar is at the north end of the central hall. The roof truss of the central hall and aisles is in arched shape, while the altar has an obvious vault. There are oil paintings about Bible stories on the wall and the portrayal of scared Virgin Mary, the father and Jesus were hanged on the altar. There are spires on the roof, all the windows and gates is of pointed arches and have fine engrave. Same kind of decoration can be found throughout all chapters. The overall style shows a similar appearance to typical Gothic mode with traditional Chinese decorations mixed.

2.3 Traditional Chinese Style—Nanxinjie Church

In 1919, under the help of British missionary Rev. J.

Fig. 5 The plan of Ganguyi Catholic Church.

Fig. 6 The facade of Ganguyi Catholic Church.

Fig. 7 The facade of Nanxinjie Church.

Watson, Chinese missionaries Zhang Ziyi, Yue Wenqing, etc. [6] built Nanxinjie Church and its attached buildings in Nanxinjie of Xi'an City. The church also planned as a rectangular-shaped building, is about 20-m long, 15-m wide and 8.8-m high. As a pinnacle style church, it is made by brick and wood. The whole building is braced by 12 shown columns and 12 hidden columns; It is capable of seating 500 people, as shown in Fig. 7.

The difference of roof truss between the collar braced roof and the queen post attic frame and the girder of Nanxinjie Church is prominent.

3. Conclusions

During the Chinese Cultural Revolution period (1966~1976), all church buildings were taken over by government. The main hall of these churches was used as factory warehouses [7]. After they had exhausted

their usefulness, most of them were dismantled for various reasons. This paper has aimed to introduce the history and architectural characteristics and details of the surviving neoteric Christian churches in Shaanxi before 1949. The conclusions can be summed up by the following points:

Although early in the colonial period the western missionaries were using western styles with traditional Chinese features, new churches, particularly in later phases, were characterized by traditional Chinese styles and created a unique Chinese colonial style.

It is obvious that the church buildings, whether Catholic or Protestant, basically followed a rectangular plan, but Catholic churches had some transepts on each side.

The churches had masonry basements while the walls were built with unfired and fired bricks.

In addition to the architectural characteristics, much has happened to the roof structure, from Chinese beam-and-column construction to western queen post attic frame and girder truss.

Although many of the neoteric Christian churches built before 1949 in Shaanxi have perished by modern times, the four cathedrals mentioned above, which

have survived over centuries through war and revolution, now they have been designated as cultural properties. The architectural layout of these sites has become part of the historical context of Shaanxi Province. The future development of urban squares from churches has been decided jointly by people in nowadays. The changes from now on, indicating the situations of the colonial architecture during the post-colonial period, are still worth observing.

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