

HONG KONG January 19, 2014

“Selling Out the Soul of China to Modern Architecture”

I apologize in advance to the People’s Republic of China and to the Chinese population as well, for what I am going to say. It might sound not humble enough from my side and even a bit arrogant of me, but I feel compelled to speak up and that is exactly what I am going to do.

Few years ago, while I was still living and working in Japan, I had the chance to go to Beijing for business. During the last 40 years or so China has been growing her economy at an incredibly high speed, by impressive rates and her capital (the city of Beijing) is considered a “revealing example” of modernization without second thoughts and without useless delays.

Obviously, for such growth, the environment had to suffer. The pollution of air increased, the quality of water has been damaged. Let’s say that with more time and greater resources available, things could have been arranged better. But, it is feasible to assume that in the next few years the situation will be under control again and many of those unpleasant environmental problems will be solved.

Generally speaking, I believe the Chinese people should be really proud of their status, in relationship to the accomplishments of the last few decades.

With those thoughts in my mind, I planned my trip to Beijing with a lot of spare time available for me, to visit the city. Mostly I wanted to see all those new constructions everybody was talking about and my first choice was the New CCTV Tower. Then, I visited also the Water Cube (The National Aquatic Centre) the Bird’s Nest (The National Stadium) and many others facilities, including stations and other sites to be completed in the near future.

“Amusing” I said to myself “but how should I understand that those new “super structures” are Chinese ???”

They seem to have no connection whatsoever with the Chinese traditions and certainly they do not possess any character of the Chinese beauty. A re-styling of China, perhaps ???

Honestly I have been in front of them for hours and I didn't feel to be in China, at all. I don't dislike these modern buildings but they don't have any Chinese flavor, they do not transfer any Chinese sentiment. We could take them and relocate them around the world, in Dubai or in Kuala Lumpur or in New York City and nobody would be surprised to find them there.

My first thought was ... maybe I don't understand the notions behind this kind of modern architecture. Maybe I do not know the Chinese traditions enough. Maybe it is time for me to change approach. And so, I did it. I went straight into the Forbidden City for one full day, from opening to closing time.

It was an amazing experience. A breathtaking feeling coming from every door, from every stone and indeed there are thousands of doors in there and millions of stones ... a huge sense of heritage ... a vast artistic patrimony of inestimable value, coming to my senses all together. Marvelous !!!

Inside the Forbidden City I realized that even though I am not Chinese, even though I do not possess the knowledge about Chinese culture ... I can feel it on my skin. I do not need to be a Chinese to appreciate Chinese art and Chinese civilization. Definitely I don't need to be born here to appreciate the taste of the Chinese cuisine.

I left Beijing thinking that something was missing. Something related to all the modern architecture I have seen there, was not really related to China and it didn't speak Chinese to me. But maybe it was my fault and I was not able to finalize my considerations about it.

More recently, I was travelling by train from Guangzhou to Shenzhen. The train had to slow down for some maintenance work on the railway. A sunny day, at early afternoon hours gave me the opportunity to clear up my mind.

I could see endless series of new edifices, far away from the Chinese capital and at first glance, their appearance seems disclosing something odd, something weird or, in few cases, something grotesque.

Most of them are towers. Every tower has something different at its top. One tower with a “sort of ship” (at its top) another one with a “pagoda like shape”, another one with an “animal”, another one with “a big hat”, another one with a “kind of Parthenon” ... and I said to myself: “What are they trying to do here ??? Are they trying to present something “majestic” to the outsiders ???

It might be something like a young girl in Broadway, a new star on stage in a theater: she wants to sing, she would like to dance but she needs also to unveil some “flesh”, just to warming up the audience. Is China falling into this mode, now ??? Is this what is going on in Beijing, as well, by any chance ??? Are we sure that this is the right price to be paid to development and to “progress” ???

Architecture requires meaningful concepts before starting planning. It is not like pollution. Pollution is a serious problem and should not be underestimated. However, to fight pollution you might change few regulations and in a short period of time, that pollution is over.

Architecture, on the other hand, is here to stay and it will stay here for decades to come. It is necessary to think about it before starting to build, because after, it will be too late. If the horrific trend related to architectural new structures remains the same, thirty years from now, the soul of China will be gone or it will be on its way to extinction.

Once the nation is without her soul ... you might continue to be able to call it China still, but it will not be the same China the entire world love and respect today.

Selling out the soul of China, just to show off and trumpet some modern architecture to the rest of the world it is not the proper way to preserve and to pass on the beautiful Chinese cultural heritage to future generations.

Maybe, few second thoughts are required, about this matter.

And I didn't even mention (yet) the monster of all mega-constructions in Beijing, the so called “Galaxy Soho”.