

American-Designed Shopping Malls in China

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Hong Kong University Press
The University of Hong Kong
Pok Fu Lam Road
Hong Kong
<https://hkupress.hku.hk>

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ISBN 978-988-8946-75-4 (*Hardback*)

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound by New Century Printing Industrial Ltd. in Hong Kong, China

Contents

| | |
|---|------|
| List of Illustrations | vi |
| List of Tables | xiii |
| Preface by Charlie Xue | xiv |
| Preface by Arwen Yingting Chen | xix |
| 1. Importing American Shopping Malls | 1 |
| 2. A Panorama of American-Designed Shopping Malls in China | 29 |
| 3. The Birth of Shopping Malls in China: 1980–1993 | 50 |
| 4. Urban Renaissance: Crafting China’s Modern Retail Ecosystem, 1994–2008 | 108 |
| 5. The Leap Stage from Increment to Surplus: 2009–Present | 161 |
| 6. Conclusion: Transnational Vision and Cultural Synthesis | 217 |
| Appendix I: List of American-Designed Shopping Malls in China by 2021 | 235 |
| Appendix II: Summary of Interviews | 256 |
| References | 280 |

Preface by Charlie Xue

During my formative years in the 1970s and early 1980s, the concept of “foreign” seemed distant yet promising. Friends, neighbors, and schoolmates who had “overseas relatives” often possessed intriguing novelties to flaunt, such as canned goods, perfumes, or clothing from foreign countries. In the early days of China’s open-door policy, when “overseas Chinese” visited Shanghai, their relatives residing in *lilong* had the opportunity to accompany them to upscale hotels and restaurants, much to the envy of their peers.

This sentiment extended to architectural schools as well. To create something new, one had to seek inspiration through extensive reading. The most influential references were often found in American architectural magazines. In the university library, many foreign design magazines were photocopies, produced “only for internal reading” and distributed by the Shanghai Research Unit of Scientific Information. Many students were daunted by the abundance of unfamiliar English vocabulary and had to rely on Chinese magazines like *World Architecture*. Learning from modern (Western) architecture was further fueled by visits from American architects who held seminars on our campuses, including the renowned Chinese American architect I. M. Pei, who delivered lectures in 1981 and 1985.

In the early 1980s, buildings designed by foreign architects began to grace the streets of Beijing and Shanghai. They served as tangible, authentic models of modern architecture for Chinese professionals and students. I vividly recall walking through the John Portman–designed garden for the Shanghai Centre on Nanjing Road, excitedly envisioning the plans in my mind. Although I did not have the opportunity to visit the Fragrant Hill Hotel in Beijing during the 1980s, I meticulously studied its plans and pictures.

Learning from Western and American architecture is seen as essential and as a “shortcut” for Chinese architects and students to advance to the forefront of the field. When I prepared my inaugural English book, *Building a Revolution: Chinese Architecture Since 1980* (Hong Kong University Press, 2006), the impact of international architecture became a pivotal chapter. This section later expanded into the book *The Global Impact: Overseas Architectural Design in China*, published by Tongji University Press in 2006. The book traces overseas design from the early 1980s to the 21st century. In 2010, Joint Publishing (Hong Kong) published my book *World Architecture in China* in three versions: English, traditional Chinese for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and the Chinese diaspora, and simplified Chinese for the Chinese mainland. These books established a comprehensive database of foreign architectural design.

Continuing my investigation into foreign architectural design in China, I explored topics such as Japanese architectural design in Shanghai, John Portman’s designs in Shanghai, the One City Nine Towns project, the National Theater competition and debate in Beijing, the Olympic projects, the Bird’s Nest stadium in Beijing, Zhengdong New District in Zhengzhou, and Kisho Kurokawa’s work in China. These explorations resulted in research papers published in *Architectural Journal* (China), *The Architect* (China), *The Journal of Architecture*, and *Cities*. These articles document building information and trace the driving forces and initiation of projects, as well as their impact on Chinese architects, engineers, decision-makers, and people’s lives. I extend my gratitude to my collaborators Peng Nu, Li Yingchun, Zhou Minghao, Wang Ying in Shanghai, Wang Zhigang in Tianjin, and Jia Wei in Beijing. I am also thankful to Professor Murray Fraser, who published four of my papers in the esteemed *Journal of Architecture* between 2008 and 2011.

As my research shifted to the construction of grand theaters in China, foreign architectural design continued to captivate my attention. In our database of 182 theaters completed between 1998 and 2020, 36% were designed by foreign architects. In 2019, we published the book *Grand Theater Urbanism: Chinese Cities in the 21st Century* with Springer. The book depicts performing arts buildings and urban construction in 10 cities across 10 chapters, each concluding with a dazzling “grand theater” recently designed by a foreign architect. The Chinese version expanded to 14 cities in 2024, using the same approach. I express my gratitude to my collaborators Sun Cong, Zhang Lujia, Xiao Jing, and Xiao Yingbo.

In my study of China’s foreign-aid architecture, my primary focus remains on the driving forces, the initiation of projects, and how these building endeavors impact local society and people’s lives. I see both the importation and exportation of architectural design as integral parts of globalization. Transplanting architectural design to distant soil necessitates adaptation and may give rise to a blend of exotic influences. In 2022, Springer published our book *Exporting Chinese Architecture: History, Issues, and One*

Belt One Road, which delves into this topic. I have also published over 20 papers on this subject in Chinese and international journals. I extend my gratitude to my collaborator, Guanghui Ding.

As my student Arwen Yingting Chen initiated her PhD dissertation, her rich tapestry of educational and professional experiences across Atlanta, Denver, Chengdu, Kunming, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong became the catalyst for our exploration. Together, we gradually converged on several key concepts: American design, American commercial and cultural influence, shopping malls, societal changes, and Chinese cities. Over the last two hundred years, China has embarked on a challenging path toward modernization, closely intertwined with learning from the West. Central to this endeavor is the comprehensive study of the United States, encompassing science, technology, culture, education, and lifestyle. The first generation of Chinese architects was predominantly educated and trained in the United States, and architectural education in China was established based on the American model.

The introduction of shopping malls, supermarkets, and fast-food chains to China coincided with the strong desire of the Chinese people for an improved quality of life in the 1980s. The enduring influence of America has persisted in China for over a century. All these societal and architectural transformations converge in the building typology of shopping malls. Despite some architects and academics having a critical view of shopping malls as emblematic of capitalist consumerism, these large-scale retail environments serve an important practical function. Shopping malls offer a comfortable, climate-controlled, and dreamy public space for residents and tourists in the dense cities of China and Asia, where personal living spaces tend to be quite small. In this context, the shopping mall effectively provides a quasi-public space that supplements the limited private living spaces, serving as a venue for people's everyday activities and social interactions. By examining the trend of shopping mall development in China and establishing connections with architectural circles in the United States and China, Arwen's thesis presents a comprehensive study of the different periods and shopping malls in Chinese cities from 1980 to 2020, incorporating both case studies and panoramic inspections.

I have been fortunate to witness China's remarkable rise since 1980. Drawing upon my experiences spanning the past 45 years and Arwen's extensive research, we have embarked on writing this book. Our aim is to document the development of shopping malls and American design in China—a journey from nothing to numerous structures in hundreds of cities in just four decades. It will be an interesting and valuable tale of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

In 2022, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Arwen conducted on-site investigations across various Chinese cities. Wherever she went, she faced quarantine periods of 7 to 14 days, sometimes even 28 days. Despite the challenges, she could still perceive the

pace of progress and the enthusiasm surrounding consumerism. We wholeheartedly express our gratitude to the many interviewees, experts in development and design, including Chen Zhidong, Anika Poon, and Edmond Yew in Hong Kong; Chen Yuchi and Wang Yongwei in Chengdu; Ma Nengrong and Ruan Yuhua in Kunming; Ai Xia, Guo Nu, Huang Wenfu, Jiang Hua, Liu Bin, Tan Zheng, Wang Zhendong, and Zhao Weiliang in Shanghai; Huang Zhou, Jiang Yujiao, Liu Miao, and Liu Yishi in Beijing; Sheng Yuhong and Yang Yanwen in Guangzhou (ranked by interview order). Thanks to Professors Weijin Wang, John Lin, and Lu Yi, the suggestions from Arwen's examination panel have pointed out more possible directions for studying shopping malls. We are grateful for the editorial efforts of HKU Press and the patience and meticulousness of Yasmine Hung and the editing and production team. We would especially like to express our gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers who carefully scrutinized our manuscript and offered valuable encouragement, critiques, and suggestions to elevate the materials to a higher standard.

Several renowned architects and design firms are featured in this book. Marisa Espe of Steven Holl & Associates, John Gibson and John Chu of KPF, Layla Tan of Arcadis, and Andrew Liu and Tom Westburg of Arquitectonica generously contributed images of their outstanding designs. Their contributions enhance the book's appeal.

My journey with Portman architecture began in 1980 when his hotel designs were featured in China's architectural journals, coinciding with Deng Xiaoping's visit to Atlanta in 1979. In 2006, while writing my book *The Global Impact: Overseas Architectural Design in China* (Tongji University Press, 2006), Dr. John C. Portman Jr. generously provided images of Tomorrow Square and the Shanghai Centre, which I later included in *World Architecture in China* (Joint Publishing, 2010). In 2009, I published a bilingual book titled *Building Practice in China*, for which Dr. Portman graciously wrote an endorsement that appeared on the back cover. In 2012, I guest-edited a special issue of *New Architecture*, focusing on overseas architectural practices in China, inviting Jack Portman to contribute an article about his company's journey in China. His insights were well received, and he provided numerous drawings and photographs, including memorable moments such as Mr. Portman meeting Deng Xiaoping and visiting Guangzhou.

These collaborations were facilitated by Emily Ann Munnell, Dr. Portman's secretary. She retired from Portman & Associates and then joined the University of Georgia (UGA) several years ago. Coincidentally, Arwen is a graduate of UGA. Through Arwen's introduction, I reconnected with Emily Munnell after 20 years. Emily assisted us in locating the Portman Archives and its senior archivist, Ms. Paige Adair, who ultimately granted permission for us to use the Portman images. I am sincerely grateful to both Emily Munnell and Paige Adair. It feels like a divine arrangement to reconnect with Portman after two decades of communication. I will always cherish the legacies of both

Dr. John Portman Jr. and Jack Portman. Shanghai Centre marks a significant milestone in the city's development during the open-door period. It has impacted various aspects of life in Shanghai. Elian Zhang from Shanghai Centre graciously provided pictures of the building, highlighting its vibrant interactions with a diverse range of people, from celebrities to everyday citizens. Thank you, Elian.

When walking on the smooth marble floors of many air-conditioned shopping malls today, I can't help but recall the bitterly cold winter days in Shanghai during the 1970s, when as a boy I would have to get up at 5 a.m. to line up in the street market, desperately hoping to fill my humble bamboo basket with a few fish. This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents, whose unwavering encouragement for me to learn English and broaden my horizons ultimately transformed the trajectory of our lives. Their steadfast belief in the power of education opened up a world of possibilities that I could scarcely have imagined amid the harsh realities of my childhood.

Charlie Qiuli Xue
Spring 2026

Preface by Arwen Yingting Chen

My doctoral journey, unexpected yet destined, wove together academic growth, professional evolution, and personal discovery. Fueled by a love for nature and a vision for a more beautiful world, I explored the science of ecology at Jinan University in Guangzhou and the creative realms of landscape architecture at the University of Georgia, with a practical path that meandered through the design studios of DTJ in Atlanta and Denver, and navigated project management at Belt Collins in Chengdu and Hong Kong. Transitioning from my early twenties to the threshold of my thirties, I found myself under the Lion Rock, Hong Kong, embarking on an architectural quest to deepen and broaden my horizons. This rich tapestry of experiences, each molding my viewpoint on transnational practices, became the cornerstone of this study.

This book represents both a culmination of my four-year doctoral study and the beginning of a new progression. I am deeply grateful to my mentors, family, and friends, whose unwavering support was a steady foundation throughout my time at the City University of Hong Kong. Your encouragement has continued to guide me as I embark on my academic career at Chu Hai College of Hong Kong.

Foremost, to Prof. Charlie Qiuli Xue, my revered supervisor. Your profound scholarly depth and rigorous discipline instilled in me the virtues of intellectual perseverance and academic integrity. Beginning my doctoral studies amid the COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges, yet your care and assistance in both my academic and personal life made this journey full of happiness and warmth. Our frequent coffee sessions and weekly excursions across Hong Kong—scaling its mountains, traversing its seas, meandering through its vibrant streets, and delving into its rich heritage—have etched indelible imprints that will enrich my life beyond measure.

Even after graduation, I am honored to continue collaborating with Prof. Xue in the realm of teaching and academia. Our weekly meetings and routine trips around Hong

Kong (I look forward to extending to the Greater Bay Area and beyond) remain a vital source of energy and inspiration for me. Bringing this book to life has been an arduous yet deeply rewarding experience. Together, we have revised and refined this work at least 10 times. As a newcomer in this field, I can hardly imagine how this work could have come to fruition without your meticulous care for every detail and well-organized approach to pushing this project forward. During this challenging process, I also want to extend my heartfelt thanks to the editorial team at HKU Press, and especially to Yasmine Hung and the editing and production team, for their commitment to precision and excellence that has marked every stage of its development.

To my co-advisors, Prof. Lu Yi and Prof. Gianni Talamini, as well as to my panel examiners, Prof. John Z. Lin and Prof. Weijen Wang, whose scholarly achievements and pioneering work in their fields have significantly enhanced my academic growth. Prof. Lu, your expert guidance on methodology and steadfast support has been a booster for continuous advancement. Prof. Talamini, your acute critiques, constructive suggestions, and innovative exhibitions have been a source of endless inspiration. Prof. Lin and Prof. Wang, your insightful comments and questions have not only refined the arguments of this study but also strengthened its comprehensiveness, rigor, and clarity, pointing the way toward promising directions for future exploration.

To my distinguished predecessors and peers, including Prof. Tan Zheng, Prof. Ding Guanghui, Prof. Xiao Jing, Dr. Sun Cong, Dr. Zhang Lujia, Dr. Gao Yizhuo, Dr. Xiao Yingbo, Dr. Chang Wei, and Dr. Zang Peng, who not only offered invaluable collaboration opportunities but also bridged connections with key professionals for this study; to Liu Xinyu, Ma Kaiyue, Qiu Yue, and Gu Yanqiu in our research group for your academic and personal companionship; to Wang Jiaqian, Gu Jiaxin, Zheng Ruxue, Song Xin, Miao Zhuang, Behnam Asadieh, Wu Xueying, Zeng Heming, Cui Kai, Liang Kaikang, and many others who have painted my life in Hong Kong with colorful strokes of joy and encouragement. May our bonds of friendship flourish and our futures be bright.

A special acknowledgment goes to the 21 interviewees previously mentioned by Prof. Xue and to the numerous participants of the questionnaire. Your generous sharing of time, knowledge, and insights, diving deep into discussions on project details, practical experiences, and informative reflections, have provided this research with indispensable data and information. It is hard to believe that nearly three years have passed since our first meeting, and I am deeply grateful that you continue to support and follow my progress.

Finally, to my dearest parents and beloved dog, Cool. It is your unreserved love and unconditional support that have lent grace and freedom to my every step, allowing me to enjoy my gains and remain cheerful through my pains. Despite the miles that separate us, our daily video calls always manage to ease the weariness of the day, and the shared moments continue to be my greatest source of comfort and strength. I may

not be the perfect daughter, but you are absolutely the greatest family anyone could wish for.

Thank fate for bringing us together, thank you all for shaping who I am today. Home is behind, the world ahead. I carry with me the lessons learned, the friendships forged, and the memories cherished, and so begins a new chapter of adventure.

Arwen Yingting Chen
Spring 2026

1

Importing American Shopping Malls

1.1 The “Before” and “After” Scenarios: Our Argument

During Mao’s era, the Chinese government boasted that the country successfully fed its 600 million people. However, even in its “richest” city, Shanghai, basic necessities were rationed: food, rice, flour, cloth, oil, sugar, cotton, and various foodstuffs like meat, fish, and bean curd. Residents collected colorful coupons seasonally, with access to food supplies easing slightly closer to the Chinese New Year. People queued in long lines at dawn in food markets to fill their baskets for the festival. These coupons, a minimal guarantee for urban residents, were allocated to only around 16% of the Chinese population in 1978, leaving the majority in rural areas without such support. This situation persisted even a decade after the adoption of the open-door policy in 1978. While production and the relations of production were liberated, and people’s motivation to produce more was awakened after 1978, it wasn’t until late 1994 that China abolished coupons for food and cloth.

Architectural form follows function. In times of commodity shortage, shops remained modest. Rice and flour were sold in food stations, where staff would weigh and bag the grains for buyers. Shops retained their appearance from the 1930s or even from the early 20th century.

Between 1978 and 1994, China experienced a surge in its economy and urban construction. Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, Kentucky Fried Chicken, coffee shops, and other foreign goods entered Chinese cities. Multi-use complexes featuring shopping malls or arcades appeared on the streets of Beijing and Shanghai in the early 1990s, symbolizing a better life and a promising future.

In the 1980s, American design introduced prototypes of commercial buildings like hotels and shopping malls to China. Notably, Chinese American architects such as

I. M. Pei and Clement Chan pioneered hotel construction in Beijing, causing a sensation. Before John Portman's Shanghai Centre stood tall on West Nanjing Road in 1989, Chinese architectural professionals had already savored his designs for a decade through architectural magazines (Xue & Li, 2008; Zhou, 1980a). Drawing from their experiences in the United States, American design firms have continuously shaped the townscape and retail buildings in China.

By the late 1990s, when GDP per capita reached \$2,000 in China's developed coastal cities, shopping malls began to sprout and multiply rapidly. Between 2003 and 2013, the number of shopping malls in China increased from 236 to 3,500, almost three times more than those in the United States (by 2014, the number of shopping malls in the United States reached 1,200) (Xue, 2015). Even after 2013, as China's economy shifted from high- to moderate-speed growth, the number of shopping malls continued to rise steadily. By 2016, approximately 4,000 shopping malls had been built in China, with 19.7-million m² of floor space under construction, accounting for nearly 60% of the global total (CBRE, 2017). According to the Huajing Industry Research Institute (華經產業研究院), the number reached 5,827 by 2023. China continues to lead as the most active market globally in terms of shopping mall development (Li, 2024). China's retail development and shopping mall construction saw significant growth over a 10-year period, transitioning from using food/oil coupons to the proliferation of shopping malls. The number of shopping malls built in China during the decade of 1994–2004 was equivalent to the total number of shopping malls constructed in the US over the preceding 50 years. This rapid and extensive construction was a key part of China's broader economic transformation during this period.

Despite the proliferation of shopping malls in both China and the US, this building type has rarely received academic acclaim; instead, it is often criticized for "killing diverse street life," helping capitalist monopoly, and promoting gentrification (see 1.4). In major architectural award competitions, accolades typically go to rural libraries, community centers, shelters for the poor, or public buildings, while commercial structures like shopping malls are seldom recognized. American designers of public and cultural buildings often shine and garner admiration in China, whereas designers of commercial buildings remain largely unnoticed. The authors of this book argue that shopping malls, introduced to China by American architects, have significantly transformed urban landscape and lifestyles in Chinese cities. These malls facilitate commodity exchange, promote market economies, provide a comfortable environment, and foster consumerism, shifting society from an ideologically oriented focus to a materialistic one. In a country steeped in tradition and rituals, shopping malls directly or indirectly promote freedom and democracy. Chapter 1 establishes the background and foundation for this discussion, while the subsequent chapters expand and strengthen our arguments.

The book primarily addresses the question “Why are American-designed shopping malls in China?” After briefly introducing the development of shopping malls in the US, we explore their emergence in China. The past 40-plus years since China adopted its open-door policy in 1978 are divided into three periods, each of which is covered in a separate chapter. From 1980 to 1993, the post-Mao era and early stage of the open-door policy saw the beginnings of shopping malls; from 1994 to 2008, the period of reform witnessed a large number of shopping malls being established in various cities; and in the 21st century, China’s global presence was characterized by digital advancements and new trends in retail architecture. The urbanization and economic landscape have undergone significant changes over the years.

For each period, we examine typical cases of shopping malls and delve into their inception, design, operation, and impact. When selecting case studies, we focus on ensuring a diverse geographical distribution and representation across different cities and economic levels. An appendix containing an inventory of American-designed shopping malls in China is included. This comprehensive approach, combining intensive case studies with broader contextual information, aims to provide a panoramic and in-depth overview of shopping mall development and American influence in China.

1.2 Foreign and American Design of Shopping Malls

Foreign architects, especially American ones, dominate benchmark projects. For example, in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, 70% (14 out of 20) of the top shopping malls in terms of sales and customer flow rates in 2021 were designed by foreign architects, with 71% (10 out of 14) of them being from US firms (Table 1.1 and Figure 1.2).

Given that the United States built the world’s first modern shopping mall,¹ mixed-use buildings and shopping malls accounted for the highest proportion (20%) of the total types of projects undertaken by the top 10 largest US architectural firms in China ($n = 184$; Figure 1.3). Xue’s (2010) project list of American architects in China (1982–2010) also supports this statement. Among Xue’s collection of 98 featured projects from 41 American architectural firms, the top three project categories were mixed-use buildings and shopping malls (31%); offices and headquarters (24%); and hospitality (12%).

The proliferation of shopping malls in China was supported by the government’s determination to embrace globalization, as well as the increasing trend of consumerism. As societal and individual wealth accumulated, customers demanded higher-quality

1. Southdale Mall (1956) in Edina, Minnesota, is considered to be the first modern shopping mall, featuring the first fully enclosed, climate-controlled shopping environment, with a combination of retail stores, dining areas, and common spaces designed to provide a comfortable, year-round shopping experience.

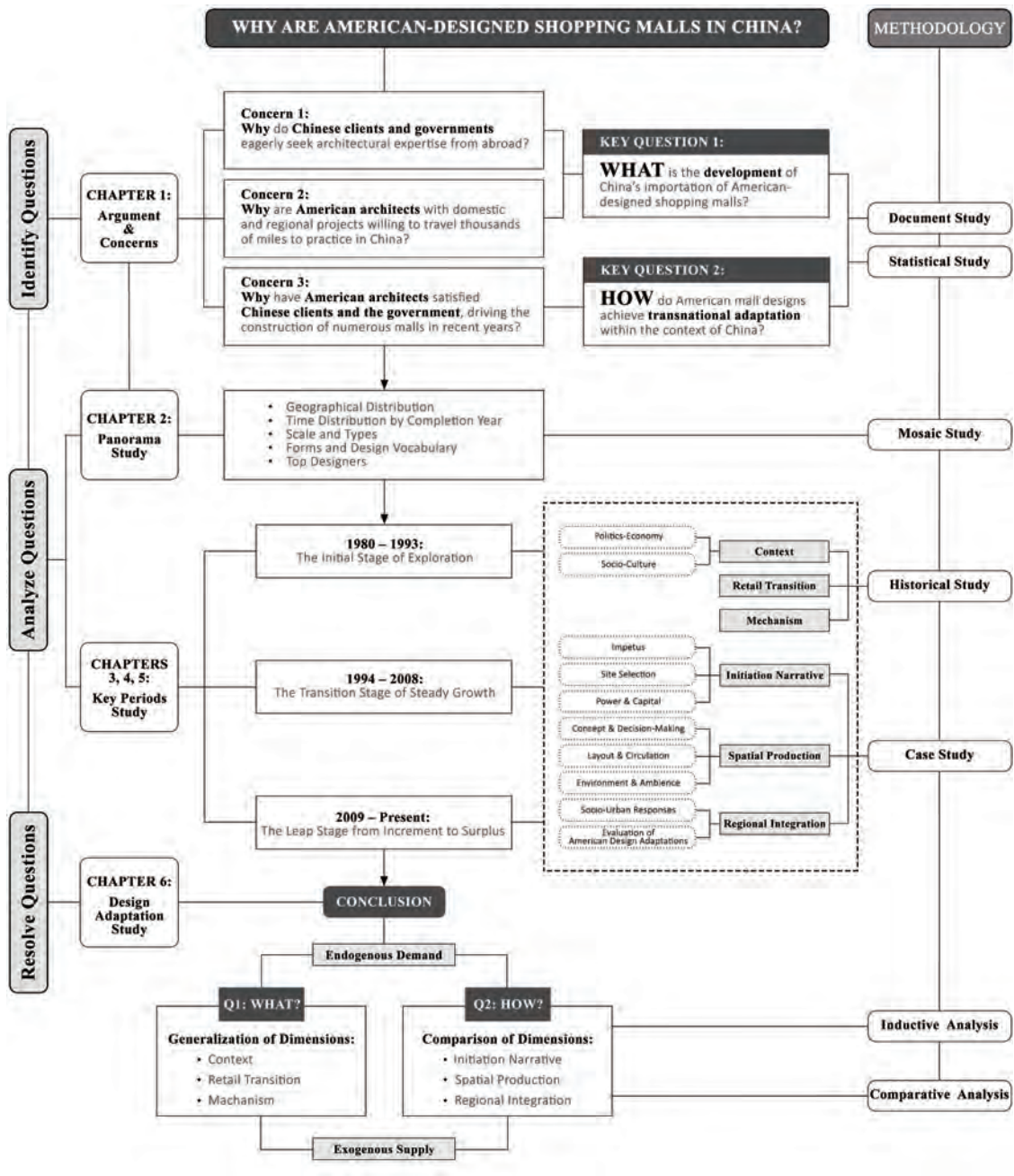


Figure 1.1: Chapter flowchart illustrating the structure and methodology. Illustrated by Arwen Yingting Chen.

Table 1.1: 2021 top shopping malls of China in terms of sales and customer flow rates (statistics by Arwen Yingting Chen)

| BEIJING | Mall Name | Sales | Designer | Base |
|-----------|---------------------------------|----------------|--|---------|
| | Shin Kong Place 華貿中心 | ¥24 billion | KPF; Sybarite | US, UK |
| | China World Mall 中國國貿商城 | ¥21 billion | Emery Roth & Sons; Arquitectonica; SOM; 5+Design | US |
| | Golden Resource Mall 金源時代購物中心 | ¥6.8 billion | Century Golden Resources Group | CN |
| | Chaoyang Joy City 朝陽大悅城 | ¥4.4 billion | Richard Markland; TANSEISHA | UK, JPN |
| | Xidan Joy City 西單大悅城 | ¥3.8 billion | DCI | US |
| | Mall Name | Cus. Flow Rate | Designer | Base |
| | Longfor Paradise Walk 龍湖·長楹天街 | 1.40 million | Tianhua Architectural Design | CN |
| | Chaoyang Joy City 朝陽大悅城 | 0.64 million | Richard Markland; TANSEISHA | UK, JPN |
| | Taikoo Li Sanlitun 三裡屯太古裡 | 0.38 million | The Oval Partnership; Arquitectonica | HK, US |
| SHANGHAI | Oriental Plaza 東方廣場 | 0.34 million | Palmer & Turner Group | HK |
| | Shin Kong Place 華貿中心 | 0.09 million | KPF; Sybarite | US, UK |
| | Mall Name | Sales | Designer | Base |
| | IFC Mall 上海國金中心 | ¥18 billion | Pelli Clarke & Partners | US |
| | Plaza 66 恆隆廣場 | ¥15 billion | Kohn Pedersen Fox | US |
| | Grand Gateway 港匯恆隆廣場 | ¥6 billion | CallisonRTKL | US |
| | iAPM Mall 環貿商城 | ¥5.5 billion | Benoy | UK |
| | Global Harbor 環球港 | ¥4.8 billion | Chapman Taylor | UK |
| | Mall Name | Cus. Flow Rate | Designer | Base |
| | Century Link Tower 世紀匯廣場 | 1.98 million | Jiang & Associates | CN |
| GUANGZHOU | Global Harbor 環球港 | 1.96 million | Chapman Taylor | UK |
| | Wujiaochang Wanda Plaza 五角場萬達廣場 | 1.46 million | China Shanghai Architectural Design & Research Institute | CN |
| | Grand Gateway 66 港匯廣場 | 0.95 million | CallisonRTKL | US |
| | iAPM Mall 環貿商城 | 0.90 million | Benoy | UK |
| | Mall Name | Sales | Designer | Base |
| | Taikoo Hui 太古匯 | ¥10 billion | Arquitectonica | US |
| | Grandview Mall 正佳廣場 | ¥0.8 billion | JERDE | US |
| | Teemall 天河城 | ¥0.58 billion | Palmer & Turner Group | HK |
| | IGC Plaza 天匯廣場 | ¥0.30 billion | 3MIX | US |
| | Mall Name | Cus. Flow Rate | Designer | Base |
| | Teemall 天河城 | 3.58 million | Palmer & Turner Group | HK |
| | Grandview Mall 正佳廣場 | 3.04 million | JERDE | US |
| | Parc Central 天環廣場 | 2.41 million | Benoy | UK |
| | Taikoo Hui 太古匯 | 2.18 million | Arquitectonica | US |

Sales data sources: 2021 sales and operation conditions of 311 shopping malls in China by Win Big Data, <http://news.winshang.com/html/069/8048.html>; 2021 sales of 125 shopping malls in China by Linkshop, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/GUB7GLNC05371Y27.html>. Data were collected from developers' annual reports, shopping malls' self-report to statistical agencies, and publications of mainstream business media.

Customer flow rates data source: 2021 first quarter report on commercial attractiveness of key cities in China by Tencent Real Estate and Tencent Map Location Big Data, <https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/2021-05-20/doc-ikmyaawc6496740.shtml>

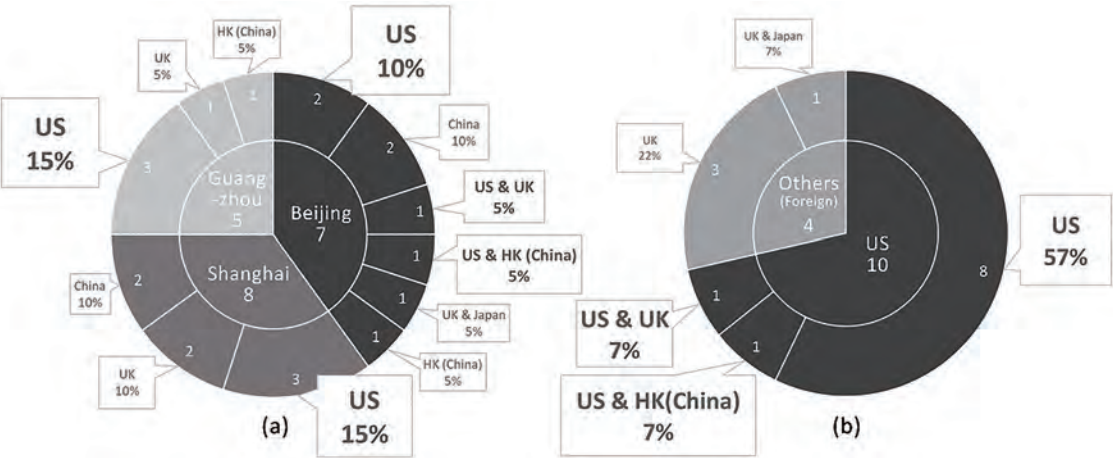


Figure 1.2: Geographical distribution of the designers for China's 2021 top shopping malls: (a) all designers; (b) foreign designers. Illustrated by Arwen Yingting Chen.

goods and shopping environments. American retail design provided a cultural and technical benchmark for the rise of Chinese consumerism. Looking back over the past 40 years, this book attempts to reveal the intertwined relationship between the demand for and supply of shopping environments in China's cities.

However, despite the dominance of shopping malls in the China-US architectural trade, existing studies have focused more on iconic buildings, such as skyscrapers (Ren, 2011; Sklair, 2017), cultural megastructures (Xue, 2019), stadiums (McNeill, 2009; Ren, 2011; Sklair, 2017), and so on, because they receive the highest investments, lead in terms of technology, and are prestigious at the global scale. Transnational shopping malls, on the one hand, are criticized for their consumerism and profit-maximizing characteristics. On the other hand, they have been overlooked by academic research because of their ubiquity, mostly covered as an integral component of overview studies or as unsystematic, fragmented cases.

Scholars have basically reached a consensus on the local impacts of transnational architecture at the national, social, and professional levels (Ren, 2013; Roskam, 2021; Short, 2013; Wu, 2006; Xue, 2006; Zheng, 2003). The influence of shopping malls at these three levels is also extensive and significant enough to necessitate a further systematic and in-depth exploration:

(1) At the national level: transnational architecture introduces advanced concepts and technologies; promotes the process of modernization and urbanization; and fills the needs of city construction, branding, and promotion (Ren, 2013; Roskam, 2021; Wu, 2006; Xue, 2005; Xue, 2006; Zheng, 2003). Shopping malls are the product of a

6

Conclusion

Transnational Vision and Cultural Synthesis

6.1 How Supply and Demand Fit

When we explored the history of shopping mall design in China, our focus stemmed from three major concerns raised at the outset of this book: Why do Chinese clients and governments eagerly seek architectural expertise from abroad and construct numerous transnationally designed buildings in China? Conversely, why are American architects—who already have projects in or near the United States—willing to travel thousands of miles across the Pacific Ocean to practice in China? A related perplexing question arises: Why have American architects satisfied Chinese clients and governments to such an extent that their shopping mall designs, often receiving negative attention in the academic world, have proliferated in China in recent years?

Our comprehensive examination of 170 American-designed shopping malls in China (Chapter 2) and the historical analysis across three periods (Chapters 3 to 5) illustrates China's rapid advancement in materialistic modernization: from virtually no shopping malls to a significant surplus in their production. Constructing a building involves various factors, including land, finances, power, materials, transportation, and numerous decision-making processes. The realization of a design reflects a collective consensus (Xue & Ding, 2018). As pioneers in shopping mall design since the 1950s, American experiences were quickly assimilated, and architects and professionals were invited to contribute. Learning from the advanced technology and management practices of Western countries, particularly the United States, has long been viewed as a shortcut to modernization and success in China, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Amid repeated commercial fluctuations, American architects sought to fulfill their professional ambitions beyond their own borders. China's Reform and Opening-Up policy created fertile ground for their endeavors. The case studies in this book reveal

that while American architects may not always be the most artistic, they are practical and adaptable enough to meet the requirements of city management and clients. Their designs are grand, modern, and trendy, appealing to both experts and end users. American-designed commercial complexes can bring both prestige and revenue for clients, which is precisely what many seek.

The demand from the Chinese side and the supply from the American side converged to create magnificent commercial buildings on Chinese soil. This is the story of the late 20th and early 21st centuries that we aim to tell in this book.

All case studies and their related narratives address the third, perhaps most intriguing concern: Why are academically criticized shopping malls embraced in China? China's development began from a very low level of economic development and urbanization, as shown in Chapters 1, 3, and 4. Billions of people migrated to cities, and constructing new towns to accommodate them became a primary task, with shopping malls serving as flagships or cornerstones in central business districts (CBDs), neighborhood centers, and transit-oriented developments (TODs). They provide clean, affordable, and fashionable spaces for everyday life and sharply contrast with the locally designed and managed commercial spaces, as shown in Chapter 1. While some may criticize them as "pseudo-public" spaces, they nonetheless offer venues for various activities—such as strolling, meeting, chatting, and enjoying air-conditioned comfort in adverse weather. This is particularly significant for those living in economically small apartments. Ultimately, "pseudo-public" spaces are better than none.

Our book does not celebrate extravagant design but objectively analyzes how these large shopping malls were initiated and developed within the context of specific cities and how end users interact with them in daily life. This approach distinguishes our work from other architectural histories that merely admire design achievements.

This chapter responds to the aforementioned three concerns by answering two key questions. Framed from both endogenous and exogenous standpoints to reflect the forces of demand and supply identified earlier, this conclusion spans three critical periods since the adoption of the open-door policy in 1978. First, a descriptive analysis examines the context, retail transition, and mechanisms to elucidate: What is the situation of China's importation of American-designed shopping malls? Second, an empirical case analysis investigates initiation narrative, spatial production, and regional integration to address the following: How do the designs of American malls achieve transnational adaptation within a Chinese context? By synthesizing the key findings of these two questions, this chapter culminates in reflections on the essence and prospects of American-designed shopping malls within China's rapidly evolving retail landscape, as well as potential avenues for future research.

6.2 China's Importation of American-Designed Shopping Malls: An Evolution

6.2.1 Development of the Context

In the initial stage (1980–1993), Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening-Up policy and the normalization of China–US relations enabled a budding openness to foreign modern architectural designs and exposure to Western culture and ideologies. Fueled by China's integration into the global economy and the subsequent welcoming of Western concepts, the arrival of American corporations such as KFC, Walmart, and Starbucks significantly transformed the notion of what constituted a quality retail space, driving demand for more sophisticated shopping experiences among China's rising middle class. Influenced by Western culture, China transformed from an old agricultural society that lauded thrift into a society admiring materialistic consumption. The extensive penetration of American technology and culture into China originated with the early momentum of “advocacy for America” sentiment.

This period was marked by a cautious yet optimistic exploration of cross-cultural exchanges in retail and architectural design. While China sought to modernize its urban landscapes with the introduction of shopping malls as symbols of modernity and economic prosperity, the United States, grappling with an oversupply of malls and the emergence of e-commerce, began to consider China as a potential ground for architectural exports within a broader strategy of targeting the rapidly expanding Asian market.

Transitioning into the era of steady growth (1994–2008), the establishment of a socialist market economy and WTO accession markedly deepened China's global market integration. This advancement was a turning point that elevated China to the world's third-largest trading economy, alleviating previous concerns among American architectural firms about the socialist economic system's uncertainties. Amid a bilateral interest in fostering economic ties, China's hosting of major international events fueled a nationwide construction boom and a prevalent demand for world-class retail spaces. This, in turn, actively leveraged American design expertise to facilitate China's unprecedented rapid urban renewal and the development of new city centers.

Moving into the leap stage from increment to surplus (2009–present), China's strategic response to the global financial crisis and the ambition to establish itself as a superpower have underscored its ascent to the world's second-largest economy. This dynamic context is further characterized by a shift to prioritize quality and innovation over rapid growth, set against the backdrop of the intricate interplay of cooperation and competition in China–US relations. Key drivers, such as the trend toward pursuing international education in the US and advancements in digital technology, have

nurtured a cosmopolitan consumer base and fundamentally transformed consumer behaviors. This transformation is accompanied by a growing focus on health, safety, and hybrid spaces, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

6.2.2 Development of the Retail Transition

Initially, China's retail sector was transformed by department stores, a testament to the early 20th-century Western influence that heralded a new era of "one-stop" consumer experiences that combined shopping with dining and entertainment, introducing novel retail practices such as open display counters, uniform pricing, and modern conveniences like air-conditioning and escalators. However, the advent of the People's Republic of China in the 1950s shifted these stores into state-operated entities focused on equitable distribution, distancing them from their capitalist roots with a growing perception of obsolescence due to a unified aesthetic and rigid spatial structure. The subsequent Reform and Opening-Up era underscored the limitations of traditional retail formats amid rising consumerism and international exchanges. Concurrently, across the Pacific, the American innovation of shopping malls offered a new paradigm, characterized by a climate-controlled environment, expansive spaces, and strategic tenant clustering. These malls created community hubs that extended beyond mere transactional spaces to satisfy emotional and psychological needs. This model, focusing on sensory appeal and versatile interactions, resonated deeply with China's eagerness for modernization and engagement with global retail advancements.

From the mid-1990s to 2008, China experienced a remarkable shopping mall expansion due to rapid economic growth, individuals' disposable income, and increasing market liberalization. This period saw significant contributions from Hong Kong developers and an influx of American architects, steering the retail landscape toward large-scale mixed-use developments. Notable projects like Shanghai's Mei-Tai-Heng (梅龍鎮廣場、中信泰富、恒隆廣場商圈) and Guangzhou's Teemall (天河城) became benchmarks, inspiring a nationwide wave of modern mall construction and relying on the American mall model that had evolved over half a century for design excellence and quality assurance. Simultaneously, the American retail sector responded to the rise of online shopping by innovating themed, indoor-outdoor hybrid malls. This evolved American experience in creating vibrant community hubs with "entertainment retail" offered a compelling blueprint for Chinese developers to differentiate their mall designs and widen regional appeal, while facilitating Chinese cities to establish a world-class image and strengthen urban competitiveness.

The leap stage from 2009 onward presents new challenges and opportunities, driven by rapid urbanization and a transformative digital revolution. This period has been marked by the participation of international architects and the rise of branded

shopping malls as keystones of China's retail maturity and sophistication. However, growth began to decline by 2014, attributed to market saturation and the expanding impact of e-commerce. To maintain attractiveness, malls have pivoted toward unique commercial planning and architectural design, emphasizing visually striking designs and "spectacle" experiences to captivate social media audiences. In the face of domestic market slump and international rivalry, American shopping mall designs prioritize user-centric daily experiences over mere visual appeal. Green building standards, notably through LEED certification, have established new benchmarks for the global retail industry. The broader societal values of flexibility, resilience, and sustainability intrinsic to American designs not only mirrored global trends but also advanced China's pursuit of a leading global presence.

6.2.3 Development of the Mechanism

China's approach to the importation of American shopping malls has been characterized by continual encouragement and expansion. In the exploration phase (1980–1993), with the introduction of a bidding system in 1984, the Chinese government employed a combination of regulatory foresight and collaborative mandates to open its architectural sector to global influences. This period was marked by the establishment of symbiotic partnerships between foreign and local design entities, as highlighted by the launch of Sino-foreign joint venture retail enterprises in 1992 and the bilateral *Agreement on the Profession of Architects* in 1993.

As China moved into a phase of steady growth (1994–2008), characterized by deeper marketization, the entry of foreign architectural firms was streamlined through the widespread adoption of global bidding practices. Foreign architectural firms were allowed to establish joint ventures or wholly owned enterprises, with loosened access to nearly all consulting sectors except for urban master planning. Meanwhile, China set up registration systems for architects and engineers, which are mutually recognized by the professional bodies in foreign countries—for example, AIA, RIBA, HKIA, and CIA. The shift from government-led execution to a market-driven approach was further underscored by the widespread adoption of the project manager system, a common practice that originated in the US, to align with international standards.

In the leap stage (2009–present), regulatory liberalization has granted increased operational freedom for wholly owned foreign design firms and simplified qualifications. This period has emphasized attracting high-quality foreign investment through improved conditions and financial incentives. The project manager system remains pivotal in project implementation, complemented by the introduction of Architect-Led Design-Build Services to enhance efficiency and quality control.

On the American side, strategies evolved from leveraging established trade practices and partnerships to adapting business models specifically for the Chinese market. Initially, they capitalized on the late-19th-century rise of American architecture's international trade, focusing on exporting building materials and technology. The postwar era saw these firms dominating the pan-Pacific market with designs emblematic of the American lifestyle. Adaptation to China's market liberalization in the 1990s involved establishing branch offices in Hong Kong SAR and Japan, serving as outposts for entering China. This was accompanied by a focus on building relationships with Chinese government and local design institutions, facilitated by legislative support and authoritative databases from organizations like the AIA and IECIC, as well as the employment of third-party agents to navigate China's relation-based market structure.

During subsequent periods, American architectural firms significantly intensified their engagement in China, employing strategies of either establishing branch offices or deploying expert teams from their home base as needed. This momentum fostered a wealth of professional resources, sharing experiences through architectural journals and providing comprehensive guidance on legal and cultural nuances. Post-2009 dynamics have diversified their approach, including new firm registrations, strategic withdrawals, and successful continuations. The American corporate structure has also been complicated by strategic mergers, acquisitions, and localized staffing for deeper market integration, alongside the blending of global designer communities and the rise of private practices by international professionals with American affiliations.

6.3 Transnational Adaptation of American Shopping Mall Designs in China

6.3.1 Adaptation of the Initiation Narrative

The initial importation of American-designed malls was marked by deliberate, high-level national engagement, aiming not only to import modern retail designs but also to introduce a broader concept of spatial and commercial modernity. Initiated through invitations from state leaders or international competitions, these early ventures garnered substantial support from both local and national Chinese authorities. Benefiting from this, they were typically positioned in prime urban settings, either within iconic commercial hubs in city centers or diplomatic districts with optimal foreign exposure, transportation convenience, and infrastructural advantages. Development cooperation was mandatory and typically emerged as equitable joint ventures, navigating the challenges of China's then underdeveloped socioeconomic landscape and uncertain investment climate with support from the Bank of China and international banking consortium.

By the new century, the impetus stemmed more from the developers' recognition of market potential and local governments' efforts to attract international investments in line with their urban planning and regional visions. With the entry of established commercial developers prioritizing risk control, principal designers were frequently engaged through direct invitations. In this era, government intervention in pioneering cities like Beijing and Shanghai significantly receded, mainly focusing on macro-administration and policy regulation, while emerging markets such as Kunming relied on government support for streamlined processes, rather than the comprehensive involvement seen previously. International bidding for land acquisition became prevalent, with a prime focus on securing positions in traditional core commercial districts, often requiring intense negotiation and strategizing due to heightened competition. This preference in China for city center locations differs greatly from the placement of American suburban malls. Although joint ventures remained a standard practice, the presence of powerful developers like Hang Lung, capable of independently financing their investments, allowed for the Chinese stake to be reduced to as low as 1%.

Over the next decades, market-driven initiatives emerged as the dominant force. As the core commercial districts of major cities reached full development, site-selection strategies have pivoted toward rapidly developing districts on the peripheries of city centers, especially those well-connected by expanding ring roads and new metro lines. Accompanying economic deregulation, independent foreign investments are growing more common. Employing star architects and a multitude of international specialist consultants has become a preferred strategy to achieve architectural distinction, quality superiority, and branding fame. Ultimately, the clients hope to find a best design solution for their huge number of investments.

Notably, Chinese design institutes have evolved through decade-long partnerships with foreign experts. Initially serving in peripheral and learning positions, where even machinery and equipment had to be imported to bridge local technological gaps, these institutes are able to competently execute construction drawings and advise on local regulations and approval processes, with construction predominantly managed by local engineering firms. Although Chinese design institutes remain in subsidiary roles, primarily involved in the later stages of projects and still facing challenges in handling sophisticated architectural drafts and overall project supervision compared to internationally experienced counterparts, they are increasingly capable and confident in taking proactive steps toward the international architectural market.

6.3.2 Adaptation of the Spatial Production

Concept and Decision-Making

The adaptation of concept and decision-making reveals a clear shift from straightforward transposition of American models to a more sophisticated fusion of American design philosophies with the rich tapestry of Chinese cultural, social, and environmental sensibilities. Early endeavors like the Shanghai Centre and China World Mall took shape amid a critical reevaluation of urban design in the US, heavily influenced by American urban and architectural discourses advocating for community-centric urbanism. The decision-making process, although integrated with intensive exchanges with Chinese governments, relied heavily on American expertise to infuse modernity and international prestige into Chinese cities.

Subsequent projects like Plaza 66 and Shuncheng Shopping Center signified a strategic pivot toward creating landmark malls that combine upscale retail with architectural distinction. The decision-making process became more collaborative and data driven, with developers seeking insights from market research and competitive analysis. The deeper understanding of local market dynamics and consumer preferences led to innovations in space utilization and design aesthetics that can be differentiated from both the traditional American mall archetype and existing Chinese retail formats.

The most recent period is marked by a leap toward creating multifaceted urban complexes that transcend mere commercial function to incorporate social, cultural, recreational, and environmental dimensions. Although many projects retain self-referential features, with star architects in particular tending to highlight their unique “signatures,” growing international competition in the context of widespread architectural globalization has led to a concerted effort to sidestep homogeneity. Developments like Taikoo Hui Guangzhou and Raffles City Chengdu exemplify how localized uniqueness can be achieved through decision-making integral to the urban experience and daily life. These projects adopt a holistic view of their role within the urban ecosystem, moving beyond merely echoing the physical context through form, color, and texture. Instead, they address the pressing urban challenges posed by China’s rapid development, emphasizing the creation of public spaces, improving connectivity, and promoting sustainability. Moreover, the design masters’ personal touches bestow a unique charismatic element in urban China. In turn, projects in China also enrich the portfolios of these international firms.

Layout and Circulation

Layout and circulation are fundamental to the underlying principles of American shopping mall design. In both the US and China, the design of layout and circulation

is predominantly adapted and morphed from typical models such as the O-shaped, dumbbell, L-shaped, and cruciform configurations (Maitland, 1990) (Figure 6.1). Although layout and circulation design has evolved toward entertainment and exploration-oriented diversity (Coleman, 2006), these designs also persistently adhere to principles focused on maximizing foot traffic, optimizing visibility, and ensuring fluid movement, with anchor stores and atriums/plazas serving as central activity nodes (Figure 6.2).

Differing from the typical American model of low-rise, horizontally expansive malls surrounded by seas of parking lots designed for automobile access, the adaptation in China shifts toward vertical malls with underground parking, suited for dense urban settings that emphasize pedestrian circulation and public transit access. Many shopping malls are at the core of TODs. To address the challenge of decreased foot traffic at higher levels, innovative solutions such as rooftop gardens, food courts, and open public spaces have been introduced. These additions have proved to be appealing draws that boost visitor numbers across all levels, especially when combined with dining and outdoor recreational activities.

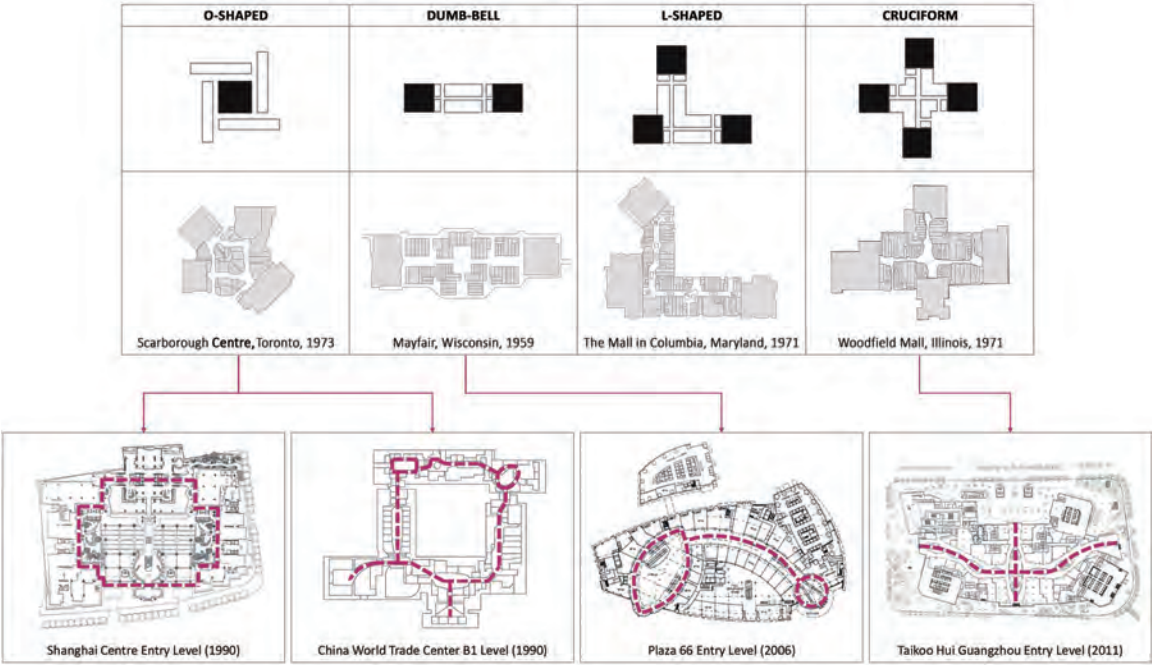


Figure 6.1: Typical mall layout with one, two, three, and four anchor stores. Illustrated by Arwen Yingting Chen with reference from prototype studies of *The New Architecture of the Retail Mall* by Barry Maitland. © 1990 by Architecture Design of Technology Press.

AMERICAN-DESIGNED SHOPPING MALLS IN CHINA

"Food coupon rationing gave way to shopping mall construction as China's economy surged. In this book, the authors explore the question of why American-designed shopping malls appeared in China since the inception of the Open Door Policy. This well-illustrated and thorough volume analyzes decades of mall construction and makes a solid contribution to an understudied topic. All in all, a thoroughly good read."

—**Peter G. Rowe**, Raymond Garbe Professor of Architecture and Urban Design and Harvard University Distinguished Service Professor

"Charlie Xue has a distinguished pedigree in uncovering lesser-known areas of contemporary Chinese architecture. Here, the authors have written a fascinating book that traces how the shopping mall—a key emblem of postwar US consumerist capitalism—came to be adopted, and mutated, across China's cities. Given global shifts, it will be interesting to see what future Chinese malls might become."

—**Murray Fraser**, Professor of Architecture and Global Culture, The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London

China's remarkable journey from poverty to becoming the world's second-largest economic power is marked by extraordinary urban growth and consumption capacity of its urban population. Central to this development fervor are multifunctional commercial complexes and shopping malls, now key features of modern urban districts. The concept of shopping malls, originally introduced to China by American architects in the 1980s, has since flourished on an even larger scale than their American counterparts.

This book delves into the origins of shopping mall development in the United States after World War II, tracing how American architects exported this building type into China's rapidly evolving urban landscapes, particularly in Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Kunming, and Guangzhou. Using primary sources, statistical analyses, and illustrated case studies, the book explores the evolution of shopping malls as a consequence of China's profound economic, social, and cultural change over the past four decades. The book also highlights the impact of American consumerism on the everyday lives of Chinese people, altering not only consumer patterns but also local architectural practices. This tale of transformation is essential reading for anyone interested in China's rapid urban development.

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Cover image: Taikoo Hui, Guangzhou, China. Courtesy of Arquitectonica.

香港大學出版社
HONG KONG UNIVERSITY PRESS



<https://hkupress.hku.hk>

Architecture / History

ISBN 978-988-8946-75-4



9 789888 946754

Printed and bound in Hong Kong, China