THE CHINESE CHURCH IN SINGAPORE
Architecture and Symbolism

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ABSTRACT

Church architecture in Singapore has been predominantly the development from
western church typologies in Colonial times to modern “form follows function”
churches, and finally to the post-modern churches of today. However, there are some
unique Chinese church buildings that do not quite fit into this trend of development.
They are often left out of the picture, or even wrongly criticized and categorized as
“eclectic” or “eccentric”. This is partly because most of the architectural historians are
scholars from the west, with little or no understanding of Chinese culture and local
theology.

Recent church buildings in Singapore show hints of post-modern influences, like
the return to ornamentation in the church and the liberal use of colours. On the other
hand, churches are meeting in renovated cinemas (eg. Touch Centre, Church of Our
Saviour), sport facilities (eg. Community of Praise) and even shopping complexes (eg.
New Creation Church at the Rock in Suntec City), in an effort to be relevant to the
community at large. There is a crisis right now in the design of the church buildings in
Singapore. As an independent nation seeking our national identity, we are unwilling to
go back to the colonial church typologies. We also see how modern architecture from
the west does not fit within our local climate and context. But yet, there has not been a
clear church typology to follow, which has developed from our region. This is
especially pressing now since the majority of Christians in Singapore are the English-
educated and the Christian community in Singapore is beginning to realize the
importance of reaching out to the Chinese-speaking population (which is the majority
in Singapore) and to be relevant to them. Church architecture can then play an active
and important role in relating to them.

It is in this context that this paper seeks to investigate some of the Chinese church
buildings in Singapore. Firstly, we will look into the history of the Chinese church in
Singapore, to explore the factors that influence its growth. Next, we will compare
Christian values and beliefs with the Chinese mindset, emphasizing the similarities,
which may then be developed into directions for design strategies. Then, we will look
into the various relationships between Christianity and local culture from a theological
point of view. The typologies of Richard H. Niebuhr (a theologian majoring in church
and culture) and the categories of T. B. Simatupang (an art critic) are used to understand
four case studies of Chinese church buildings in Singapore.

From the case studies, I will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.
Finally, I hope to conclude and propose a possible direction for the future design of
church buildings, especially for Chinese churches, in Singapore today.

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