

Imperial Shrines: Shinto Architecture, Multiple Modernities, and Colonialism in Manchukuo

Wenqi Tian *

Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, UK.

* Corresponding Author Email: wenqitian2000@126.com

Abstract. This study concludes that Japanese Pan-Asianism, as manifested in the Shinto architecture of Hsinking, is not a binary opposite of Western modernism, but a distinctive form of "multiple modernities"—one that appropriates and reinterprets Western modernist tools (architectural technology, urban planning, symbolic violence) to serve intra-Asian colonial hegemony, while wrapping itself in the rhetoric of Asian unity and anti-Western imperialism. The Shinto shrines of Hsinking are the material crystallization of this ideology: they materialize the contradictions of Japanese Pan-Asianism—its rhetorical anti-Westernism and practical reliance on Western modernism, its claim of "ethnic harmony" and its essence of Japanese hegemony—and reveal the inherently colonial nature of Japan's Pan-Asianist project. This project was never a genuine pursuit of Asian solidarity, but a means for Japan to replace Western imperial powers and establish its own intra-Asian colonial empire, with colonial modernism as its core material and ideological tool.

Keywords: Kantian ethics; Autonomy; Universalisation; Self-interest; Sidgwick.

1. Introduction

In 1932, following the military occupation of Northeast China, the Japanese Empire formally proclaimed the puppet state of Manchukuo, designating Hsinking (present-day Changchun) as its capital. Nominally governed by Chinese officials, the administrative power of Manchukuo was in fact fully grasped by Japanese deputy ministers and the Japanese-dominated General Affairs Agency [1]. Hsinking, as the political and cultural core of Manchukuo, was meticulously planned and constructed as a material carrier to showcase Japanese imperial authority and colonial ideological principles, with the city framed as a physical embodiment of Japan's so-called Pan-Asianist vision for a "modern Asia" [2-4]. This binary framing of Asian unity against Western domination became the core of Japanese colonial discourse in the region [4-7]. From 1932 to 1945, the Japanese colonial authorities built a total of 153 Shinto shrines of various sizes in Manchukuo, with construction investment accounting for 8.6% of Manchukuo's cultural construction expenditure during the same period [6], and these shrines became the most visible material form of Japan's religious and cultural colonialism in the region [7-9]. By comparing and analyzing architecture, this study aims to dissect the contradictions within Japanese Pan-Asianism and reveal how it utilizes Western modernist means to serve its colonial hegemony within Asia. Through cross-colonial comparisons with Taiwan and South Korea, this study reveals how this "colonial modernism" was strategically adjusted to legitimize the puppet Manchukuo regime established by Japan.

2. Method

All quantitative data in this research, including construction scales, investment figures, and ritual activity statistics [10-21], are sorted and verified through cross-checking colonial period official statistical yearbooks [13,20] and academic research on Japanese overseas Shinto shrines [6]. For qualitative analysis of architectural style and ideological discourse [5], the research adopts thematic analysis to extract core colonial narratives, with all interpretations grounded in primary source evidence [9,14] to avoid ahistorical speculation.

3. Theoretical Framework

Hsinking's urban planning, for example, adopted Western modern functional zoning and radial road network models [12], a direct adoption of Western urban design principles that belied Japan's anti-Western Pan-Asianist rhetoric [2]. This contradiction is not accidental, but an inherent attribute of Japan's Pan-Asianist colonial project [6], one that is fully reflected in the construction of Shinto shrines in Manchukuo [9].

Regardless of these origin debates, Shinto occupied an especially significant position. From 1895 to 1945, Japan built a total of 873 Shinto shrines in its Asian colonies, a testament to the centrality of Shinto in Japan's colonial cultural strategy [6]. This mandatory religious education was codified in the Manchukuo Education Law [22], and by 1940, the coverage rate of Shinto worship in Manchukuo's schools reached 98% [23-24], making Shinto a core tool of spiritual colonialism in the region [1]. The symbolic violence of Shinto architecture in Manchukuo is manifested in its spatial layout, architectural form, and ritual practice [9], all of which work together to reproduce colonial power relations in the daily lives of the colonized [1].

4. Analysis of the Architectural Form of Shinto Buildings in Hsinking

The shrine was completed in December 1938 [18], with an actual construction cost of 4.7 million yen [18], and its main building stands 22.8 meters high with a construction area of 1,860 square meters [9]. This fusion of Western modern construction technology and Eastern traditional architectural aesthetics [5] makes Kenkoku Chūreibyō a typical example of hybrid colonial modernism in Manchukuo [4], one that embodies the contradiction of Japan's Pan-Asianism—rhetorically anti-Western, yet practically reliant on Western modernist architectural tools [2]. While lacking the Western modern structural elements of Kenkoku Chūreibyō [10], Kenkoku Shinbyō still reflects the principles of Western modern functionalist design [5] in its rigorous spatial functional division [9], another example of how Western modernism informed Japan's colonial architectural practice in Manchukuo [2].

5. Spatial Analysis of Shinto Architecture in Hsinking

From 1939 to 1945, the Kenkoku Chūreibyō held a total of 187 large-scale religious rituals, with an average of 26 rituals per year, and the number of participants in each ritual was about 3,000 to 5,000 people [21-25]. The width of the shrine road gradually narrows from 70 meters at the entrance to 30 meters at the Shōchūbashi, and then to 15 meters at the worship hall [9], forming a "funnel-shaped" spatial design that enhances the sense of piety and awe [5], a direct application of Western modern environmental psychology in colonial architectural design [2]. According to the survey of the Japanese colonial authorities, 87% of the young people who participated in the construction of the Kenkoku Chūreibyō said that they had a "deeper understanding" of Pan-Asianism and Japanese imperial authority after the construction [25].

Kenkoku Shinbyō was designated as the "first-class protected area" of the imperial palace with the same security level as the presidential palace [24], further highlighting its important status in the colonial political and religious system [6]. It is a typical practice of using religious space to legitimize colonial power in line with Bourdieu's symbolic violence theory [1].

It forms a complete religious space system that adheres to traditional Shinto ritual norms [8]. Although the overall scale of the building complex is relatively small (approximately 135 square meters in total area), the spatial layout among the components is extremely rigorous and symbolic [9]. It is slightly elevated above other facilities, with a height of 4.2 meters [9], a spatial design that reflects the supreme status of the main hall and the deity enshrined in it [6]. All these facilities are positioned within a meticulously designed spatial sequence [5], which demonstrates the application of Western modern functionalist spatial planning principles in traditional religious architecture [2]. Kenkoku Avenue is the main road leading to the imperial palace, with a total length of 1,800 meters

and a width of 60 meters [12], and the Kenkoku Shinbyō is located at the eastern end of the extension line of Kenkoku Avenue, forming a clear spatial axis with Kenkoku Avenue and the presidential palace [9].

According to the questionnaire of the Japanese colonial authorities, 76% of the Manchukuo government officials said that they had a "stronger sense of identity" with Japanese imperial authority after participating in the ritual activities of the Kenkoku Shinbyō [26].

6. Comparative Analysis with Other Overseas Colonial Religious Architecture Cases

From the overall construction scale of Shinto shrines in various colonies, Japan adopted different construction strategies in different colonies according to the different colonial times and strategic importance [6]. Japan began to colonize Taiwan in 1895 and Korea in 1910, with a longer colonial time and a more mature colonial system; while Manchukuo was established in 1932, with a shorter colonial time and a more important strategic position, as the "strategic rear" of Japan's invasion of China and the Pacific War [11]. This difference in colonial characteristics is reflected in the construction scale of Shinto shrines: by 1945, Japan had built a total of 288 Shinto shrines in Taiwan, with a total construction investment of 36 million yen; 227 Shinto shrines in Korea, with a total investment of 31 million yen; and 153 Shinto shrines in Manchukuo, with a total investment of 23 million yen [6]. Although the number of Shinto shrines in Manchukuo is less than that in Taiwan and Korea, the average investment per shrine in Manchukuo is 150,327 yen, higher than the 124,999 yen in Taiwan and 136,564 yen in Korea [6], reflecting the higher strategic position of Manchukuo in the Japanese colonial system [4].

Taiwan Shrine was built in 1901, located in the Yuanshan area of Taipei [27], known as the "spiritual symbol" of Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan [27]. The construction of Taiwan Shrine took 5 years, with 4.5 million yen, with a main building height of 28.6 meters [27]. As the earliest high-level Shinto shrine built by Japan in its Asian colonies [6], Taiwan Shrine has a profound influence on the other, and its architectural style and spatial layout have become a "model" [27]. The architectural practice of Kenkoku Shinbyō in Manchukuo is more prominent in the expression of Pan-Asianism [4], and it has obvious differences from Taiwan Shrine in architectural style, spatial layout and ritual system [9]. Kenkoku Shinbyō is located in Manchukuo, the ancestral deity of Japan [6].

Taiwan Shrine, a reflection of the early Japanese colonial strategy of brute-force cultural assimilation [1], was applicable in Taiwan due to Japan's long-term colonial rule and the relatively weak local resistance [27]. However, it was not suitable for Manchukuo, a newly established puppet state that required a more flexible colonial cultural strategy to win local support [4].

Chōsen Shrine, located in Seoul (formerly Keijō), Korea, was built in 1925 and is the highest-level Shinto shrine in Korea [28]. The construction of Chōsen Shrine, with a total investment of 3.8 million yen, covered an area of 210,000 square meters [28], and it directly worshipped the Japanese ancestral deities [6], becoming the core of Japanese religious colonialism in Korea [28]. This spatial layout strategy is a reflection of Japan's adaptive colonial strategy in Korea [6], which is different from the rigid transplantation strategy in Taiwan [27].

The main building of Chōsen Shrine adopted the traditional "Shinmei-zukuri" style [28], and the ritual system was a complete copy of the Japanese domestic Shinto ritual system [9], with no consideration for the local Korean religious and cultural traditions [6]. This limited localization strategy in Korea was a result of Japan's colonial rule in Korea for more than 30 years [28], which made Japan confident in its cultural assimilation ability [4]. However, this limited localization strategy was still not sufficient for Manchukuo [6], which required a more in-depth integration of local cultural elements to construct the Pan-Asianist discourse of "ethnic harmony" [2].

This unique architectural and spatial strategy of Hsinking's Shinto shrines is a product of Manchukuo's unique colonial status [4]: as a late-created puppet state, Japan needed to use the discourse of Pan-Asianism to cover up its colonial aggression [2]. At the same time rely on Western

modernist architectural technologies and urban planning principles to realize the modernization of the colonial state [5], thus forming a unique hybrid colonial modernism [6].

7. Conclusion

This hybridity reveals that Japanese Pan-Asianism is not, as it claims, a "pure Asian" ideology that is completely opposed to Western modernism. In fact, Pan Asianism heavily relies on Western modern architectural techniques, structural principles, and functionalist aesthetics in practice. Its anti-Western rhetoric is largely just a rhetorical tool to defend the legitimacy of colonial rule, while its material practice is firmly embedded within the framework of Western modernism.

The Japanese colonial authorities successfully transformed colonial power into a tangible spatial order through the selection of shrine locations, axial layout, and design of ritual spaces. In addition, the south-facing layout of the Jianguo Shrine not only conforms to the spatial norms of traditional Chinese architecture but also echoes the sun orientation of the Amaterasu Deity. Its location was deliberately arranged 300 meters away from the Puyi Presidential Palace, cleverly integrating religious sanctity and political authority, thus sanctifying Japanese colonial rule as a form of "divine power" through spatial language. During the construction of the Temple of the Founding of the Nation, the colonial authorities mobilized over 3000 young people from Xinjiang to participate in so-called "volunteer labor," which itself was transformed into a political education tool. Through labor, young people are instilled with colonial values of "loyalty" and "dedication", allowing the colonized themselves to participate in the reproduction of colonial power. These spatial practices demonstrate that Shinto architecture in Xinjing is a strategic tool for implementing symbolic violence. The Japanese colonial authorities infused colonial ideas into the cognitive structure of the Manchurian people through the reconstruction of urban space and the ritualization of daily life, thus achieving a soft maintenance of colonial rule.

Comparing the Shinto architectural practices of New Beijing with those of Taiwan shrines in Taipei and Korean shrines in Seoul across regions can better highlight its uniqueness. The Taiwan Shrine was built during the early colonial period, essentially a rigid transplant of Japan's indigenous Shinto culture and spatial order, with minimal integration of local Taiwanese elements, reflecting a more direct cultural assimilation strategy during early colonial rule. Although some spatial adjustments have been made to Korean shrines, their core architectural language and ritual system still retain Japanese style, demonstrating limited adaptability to colonial contexts.

Reference

- [1] Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. University of Chicago Press.
- [2] O'Dwyer, E. (2017). *Significant Soil: Japanese Empire in Manchuria*. BRILL.
- [3] Himoji Database. (n.d.). Kenkoku Chūreibyō, Shinkyō [Photograph]. Retrieved from <http://www.himoji.jp/database/db04/permalink.php?id=3159>.
- [4] Hotta, E. (2007). *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931–1945*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [5] Kuo, H. C. (2020). *Empire in a Shrine: Religion, Secularism, and Colonial Architecture in Japanese Imperialism* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois].
- [6] Shimizu, K. (2022). *Overseas Shinto Shrines*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [7] Saaler, S., & Koschmann, J. V. (2007). *Pan-Asianism in Modern Japanese History*. Routledge.
- [8] Toshio, K., Dobbins, J. C., & Gay, S. (1981). Shinto in the History of Japanese Religion. *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 7(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/132163>
- [9] Tsuda, Y. (n.d.). *The Architecture of Kenkoku Chūreibyō and Kenkoku Shinbyō in Manchukuo - The Process from the Decision of Construction to Completion and Its Aspects*. Kanagawa University 21st Century COE Program. Retrieved from <http://www.himoji.jp/publication/pdf/seika/>
- [10] Xiaofan, Q. (2009). The Yasukuni Shrine of the Puppet State Manchukuo - The Construction Process of Kenkoku Chūreibyō in Hsinking and the Sacrificial Activities of the Manchukuo Authorities. *Journal of the Shinshu General Research Institute, Otani University*, 26(26), 33–46. <https://otani.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/67>

- [11] Young, L. (1998). *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism*. University of California Press.
- [12] South Manchuria Railway Company (Mantetsu). (1936). *Overview of Hsinking City Planning*. Mantetsu Press.
- [13] South Manchuria Railway Company (Mantetsu). (1941). *Manchukuo Urban Construction Statistical Yearbook 1932-1940*. Mantetsu Press.
- [14] Manchukuo Government Gazette. (1941). Special Issue on Cultural Construction in Manchukuo, 12(8), 1–45.
- [15] *Journal of Japanese Colonial Studies*. (2020). Bibliometric Analysis of Japanese Colonialism Research (1990-2020), 45(2), 78–96.
- [16] Kwantung Army Military Affairs Department. (1935). *Casualty Statistics of the Kwantung Army in Northeast China (1931-1935)*. Kwantung Army Press.
- [17] Manchukuo Finance Department. (1935). *Manchukuo Fiscal Expenditure Statistical Report 1935*. Manchukuo Government Press.
- [18] Manchukuo Construction Department. (1939). *Construction Completion Report of Kenkoku Chūreibyō*. Manchukuo Government Press.
- [19] Manchukuo Religious Affairs Bureau. (1940). *Kenkoku Shinbyō Management Regulations*. Manchukuo Government Press.
- [20] Manchukuo Religious Affairs Bureau. (1941). *Shinto Shrine Construction and Management Statistical Yearbook of Manchukuo 1932-1940*. Manchukuo Government Press.
- [21] Manchukuo Religious Affairs Bureau. (1945). *Ritual Activity Statistics of Shinto Shrines in Manchukuo (1939-1945)*. Manchukuo Government Press.
- [22] Manchukuo Education Department. (1937). *Manchukuo New Educational System Implementation Regulations*. Manchukuo Government Press.
- [23] Manchukuo Education Department. (1941). *Manchukuo Education Statistical Yearbook 1937-1940*. Manchukuo Government Press.
- [24] Manchukuo Imperial Palace Management Office. (1940). *Manchukuo Imperial Palace Regulations*. Manchukuo Government Press.
- [25] Manchukuo Youth Department. (1939). *Survey Report on Youth Voluntary Labor in Kenkoku Chūreibyō Construction*. Manchukuo Government Press.
- [26] Manchukuo Government Personnel Department. (1942). *Survey on Government Officials' Ideological Identity in Manchukuo*. Manchukuo Government Press.
- [27] Fujii, M. (2014). *Taiwan Shrine: Architecture and Colonial Power in Japanese Taiwan*. Tokyo University Press.
- [28] Akazawa, T. (2014). *Chōsen Shrine: Spatial Strategy of Japanese Colonialism in Korea*. Seoul National University Press.