

FLAG DISPLAY IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE ARCHITECTURE

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INTRODUCTION

Unique styles of architecture and protocols for related flag display have evolved in China over thousands of years, the one in harmony with the other, and each expressive of cultural and historical significance. Buildings in traditional Chinese style include government offices, temples, and large-scale private houses. Such buildings often comprise composite communities, arranged along a central axis and the principles of *feng shui* – or harmonious alignment with nature. In the appropriate place on both sides of the axis, there normally stand two flagpoles in the Chinese style, the location of one in symmetry with the other.

THE TRADITION

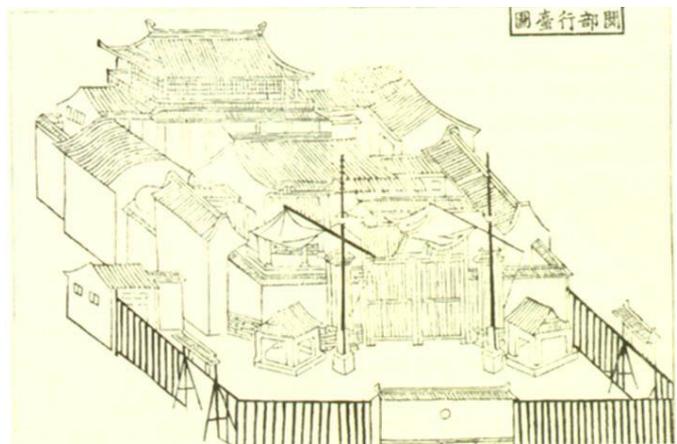
The careful location of flagpoles in front of public buildings can be dated to at least the Song and Ming dynasties, their evolution reaching greatest extent during the Qing dynasty, evidenced in the wealth of images and other records from that period, an important legacy and source for research. Accordingly, the materials informing this paper are taken mainly from the two centuries 1700 to 1900.

Chinese flagpoles consist mainly of two types – those forming a processional line for ceremonial purposes and those placed in the forecourt or open space around a building.

These last are straight and tall, their volume and height in harmony with and in proportion to the architectural style of the building or complex.

Using best quality stone and timber, their basic structure is as follows:

1. As a foundation, a granite or white marble cube is firmly set to ensure stability of the flag pole. Floral designs are engraved all around a circular hole in the middle of the cube to house the flag pole, with two large and heavy stone slabs shaped to act as extra buttress for the pole;
2. The pole itself is made of straight and tall timber, this also dressed or shaped for insertion into the base while a bracket supports a transverse and moveable yard – though some masts are not so equipped, and only a military banner is flown from the top of these;
3. The moveable arm, clearly visible in this diagram of the Qing dynasty Customs House Macao, is shorter and thinner than the main mast, and fixed to it in a flexible way to hang the banner, adjustable to swivel at any angle, up or down; and
4. Two sets of ropes and hooks are used to control the elevation and angle of the banner.



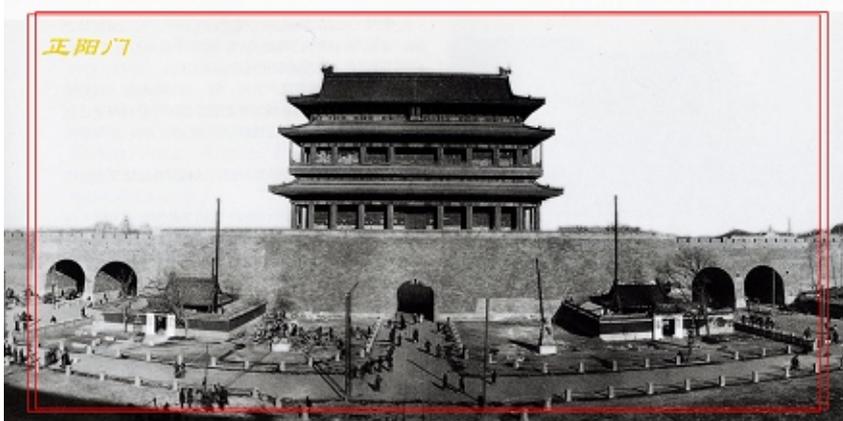
Macao Customs House – Qing Dynasty.

Traditional Chinese architecture and flagpoles are interrelated. The height, position and overall style of the flagpole should be in proportion to the layout and size of the main building and its open spaces. The angle and distance between the flag pole and the centre-line of the main entrance have a specific connection to the planned area of the whole site – enclosed space and open space, especially the forecourt and approaches. For example, the spaces between flagpoles are broad in a large open space, but narrow in a small one. When approaching the building from the front, the height of the flagpole must not only create a deep impression on the beholder, but also enhance the magnificence of the architecture and enrich the open space.

Not all traditional buildings have a flag pole, which underlines the ancillary but subordinate nature of flagpoles in relation to buildings. In any case, the flag pole should not overwhelm the premises it serves. Study of ancient Chinese architecture shows that the flag pole, where there is one, is always construed as part of the whole architectural vision, but dominate not.

The notion of "right side superior" has applied in China since ancient times. That is to say, of two adjacent objects, or the same in symmetry, the one to the right of the owner (and to the left of the observer facing) lies on "the better side". In relation to buildings, however, to determine which flag pole is "on the right" requires **looking from the building** - thus facing out into the forecourt - for the flag pole is taken as an integral part of the building plan. In this manner the viewers' right still stands for "the right".

In contrast, people in China generally now regard the right side **to be that of the viewer who faces the building but this is incorrect**. The flagpole in front of the main hall of the Jingjiang Princes' Palace in Guilin is on the right side of the building, in accordance with ancient custom. It is notable also that the flag poles stand on the right side of the Blue House, the Executive Office and President's residence in Seoul, South Korea.



Left: Beijing Zhengyang Gate in 1916

Right: Special Municipal Government Building, Shanghai, built in 1933



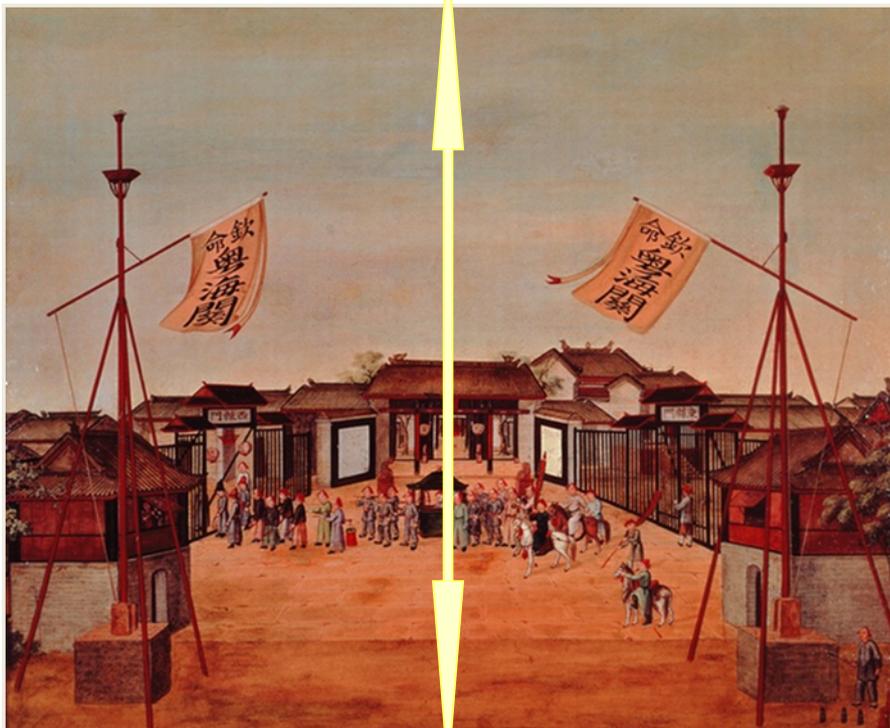
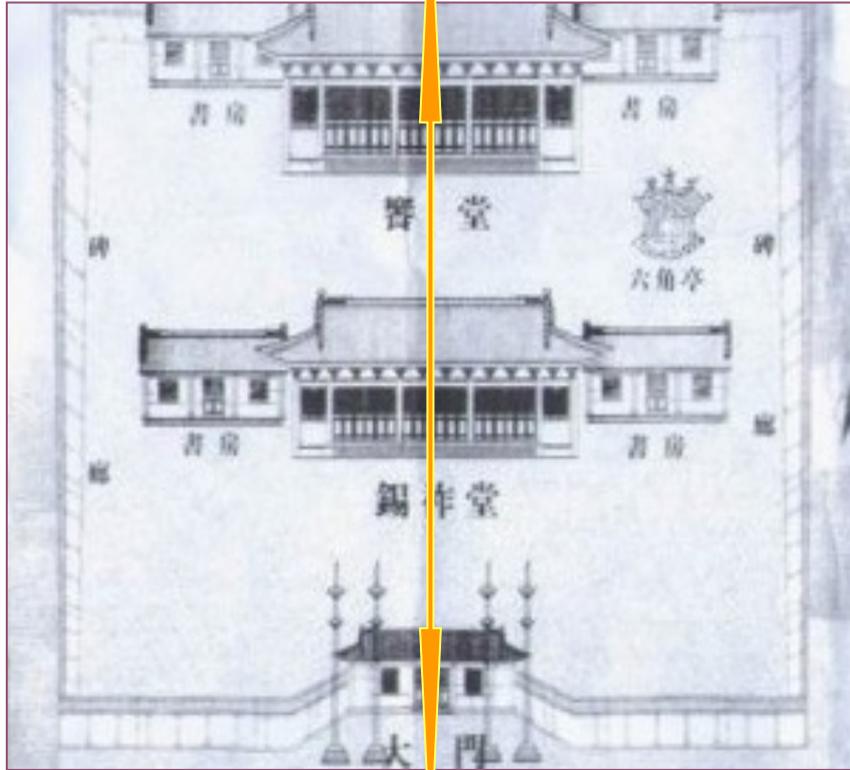
In architectural planning and design, a central axis will be highlighted, which is set in the middle of the building aiming a balance for all things and making a symmetry for the left side and right side, thus holding its position as the soul of the building.

Flagpoles can't be erected on the central axis in front of antique buildings; for a building, its flagpoles stand in a subordinate status.

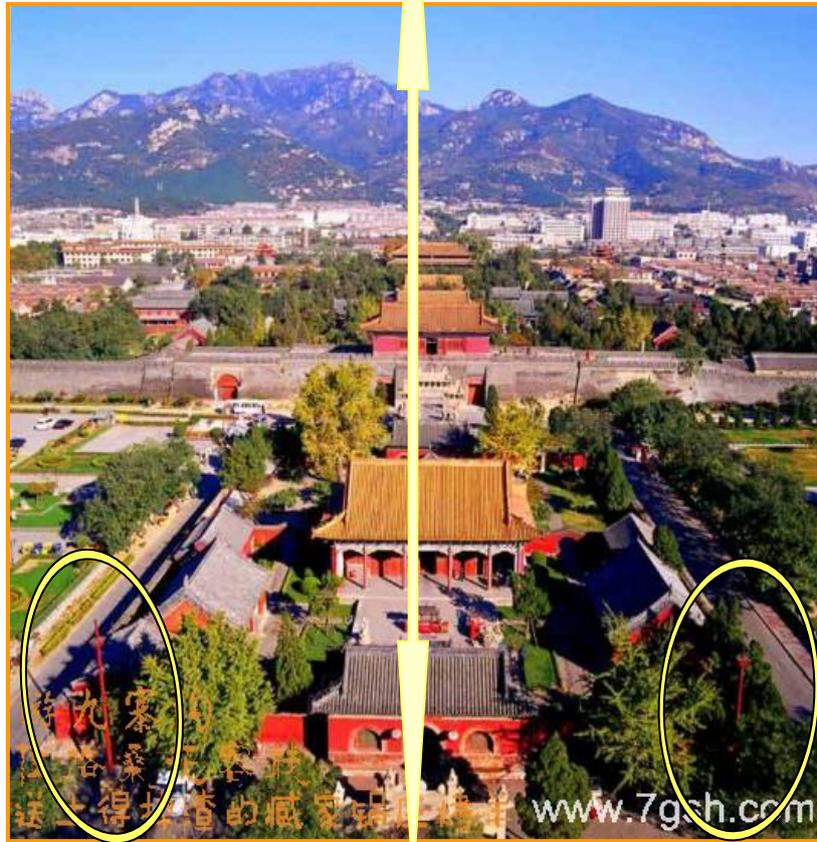
Ideal layout of temples and central axis



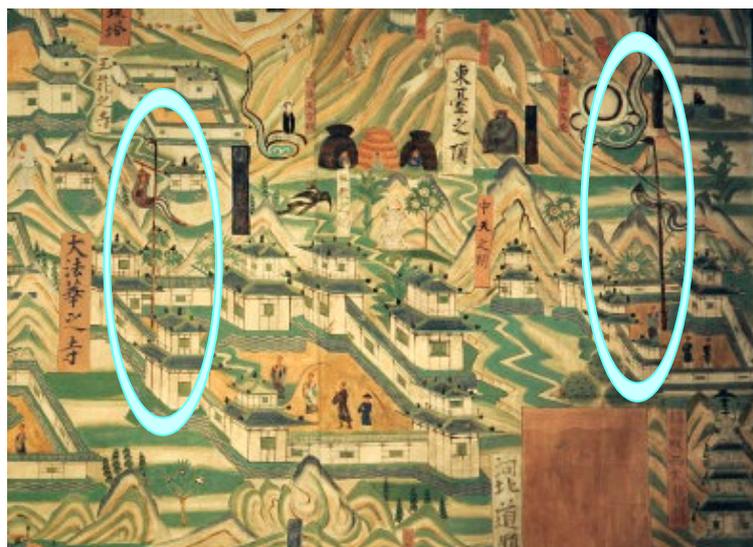
Ancestral Hall



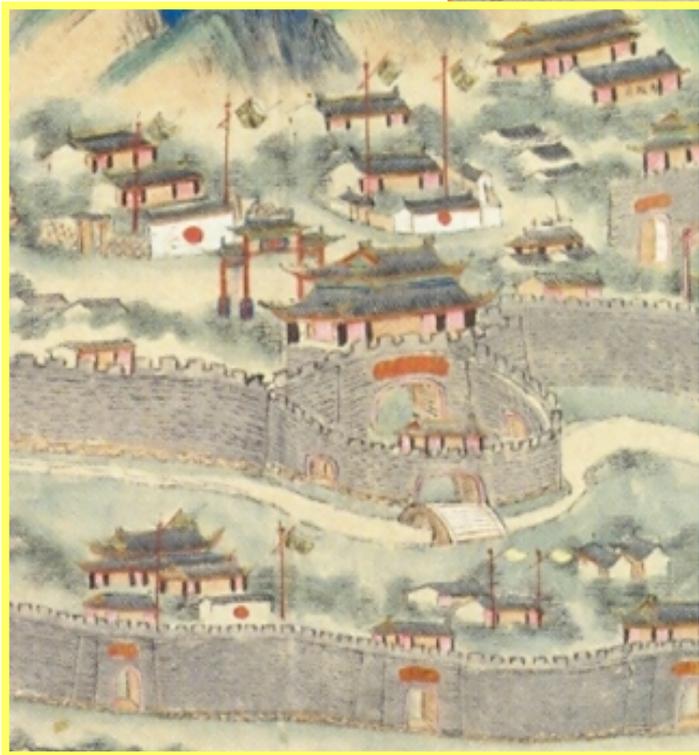
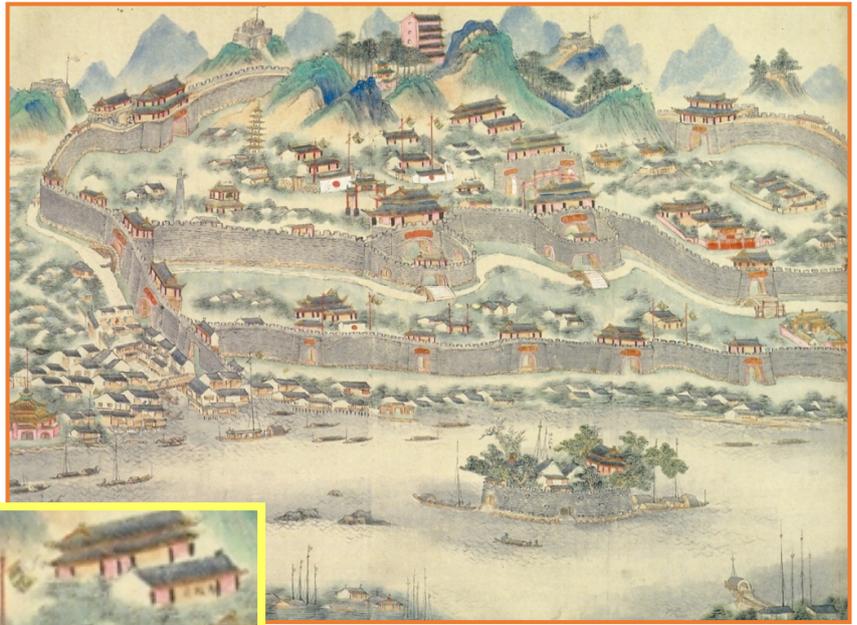
Customs Office in Guangdong



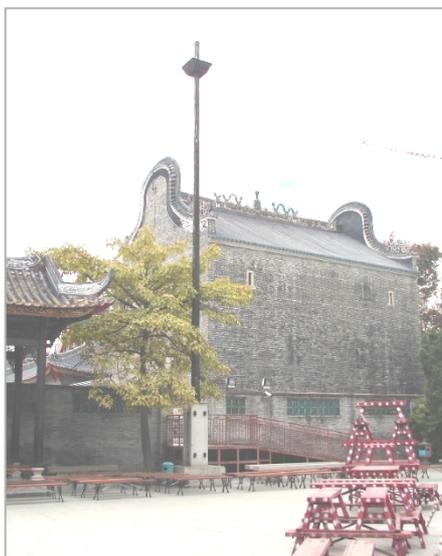
Dai Temple by Mount Tai, central axis and double flagpoles.



Ming Dynasty, Nanjing – about AD 1540



Guangzhou of Qing Dynasty, many double flagpoles.



Typical antique flagpoles



Flagpoles



Different types of flagpoles





WESTERN INFLUENCES

From 1840, western countries, especially Britain and France, used military force to open China to foreign trade and consent to port concessions under foreign control.

This opened the door to the infiltration of western cultural influences in China, and in the process, different flag protocols and the weakening of traditional usage. Qing Dynasty Governors were forced to change their concept of China from "Imperial Empire" to "Country". While officials, ministers and citizens were keepers of the old flag system, and notwithstanding the continued use of the Imperial flag system, which included flagpoles, China was obliged to devise a national flag, and the Yellow Dragon Flag was gradually introduced. With the deepening influence of western culture, western flag practices gained ground after the Revolution of 1911 overthrew the Qing Dynasty. The age-old flag system of China's dynasties was no longer followed, and the Western-style of a single straight flag pole rapidly became the norm.



1844
Guangzhou,
American Garden

1820s
Guangzhou
foreign business halls

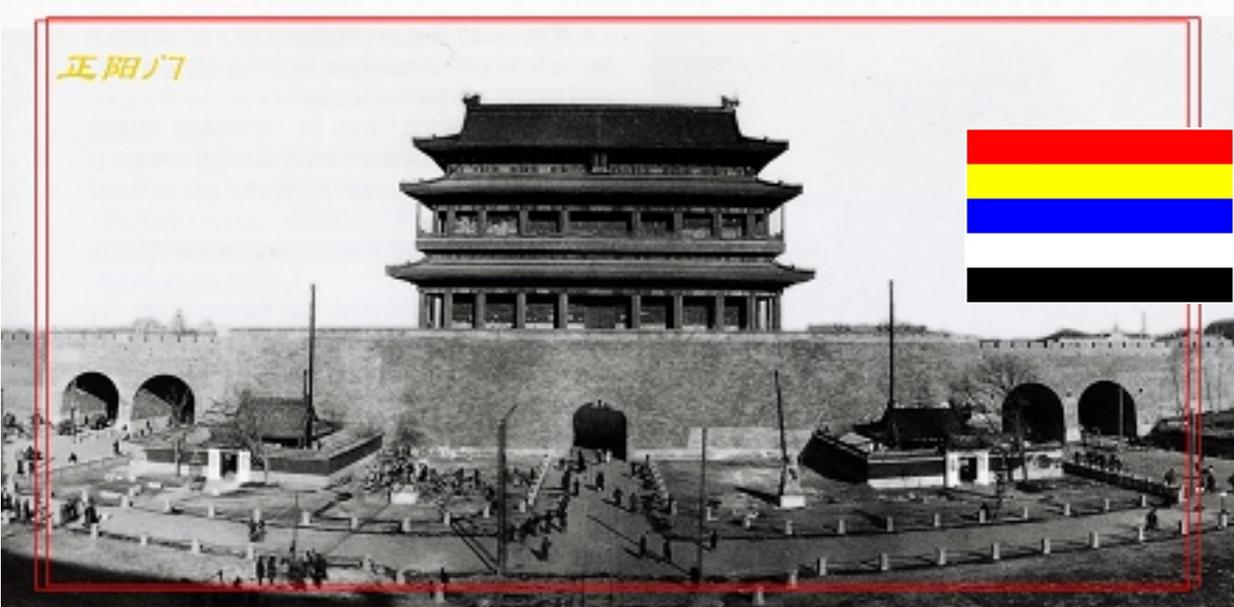


The view of looking toward north-east Cantonese Street. From Belfry, Tientsin.

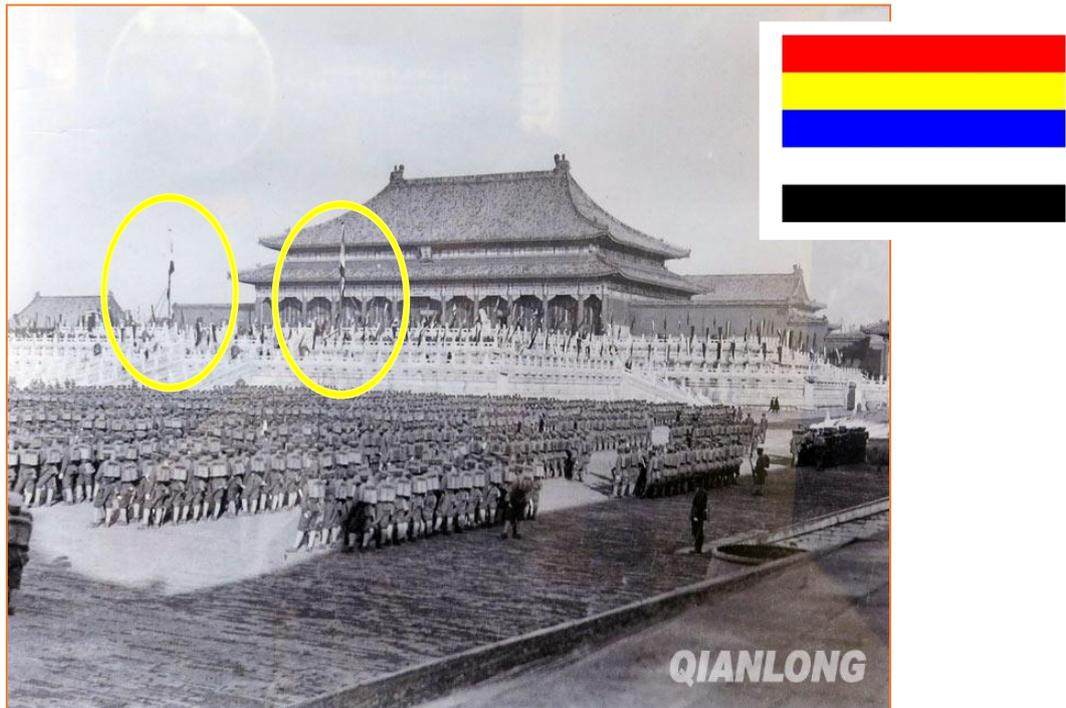


**In 1902 Queen Ci Xi
return to Beijing**

**Zhengyang Gate,
eastern pole the
special dragon flag.**



In 1916, the repaired Beijing South Facing Gate has flagpoles in its both two temples.

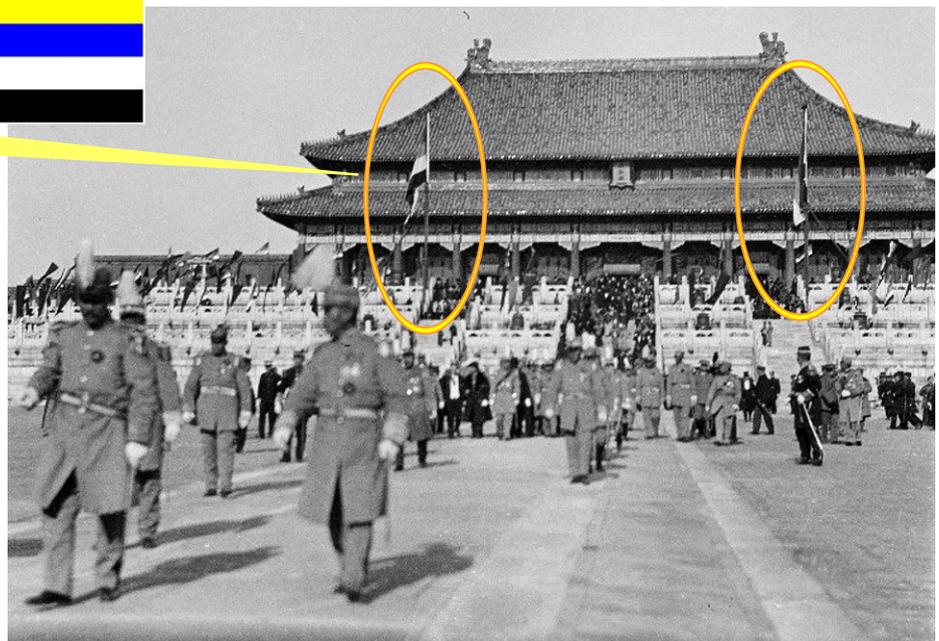


In 1918 Nov. Beijing, the Imperial Palace Square, WW I victory Parade

The last hundred years have seen a fundamental cultural change. Between 1912 and 1949, China has completed the transformation from double flagpoles to a single flag pole directly in front of public buildings. The most remarkable transformation was the new flag pole of the national flag in Tian-anmen Square. The political reasons for this were well-founded, considering the importance of the country's self-image - *jintian Zhongguo zhanqilai-le!* - and as a symbol of that, the rising status of the national flag. Since then, a single pole or set of poles along the axis and in front of official and other public buildings (both Chinese and Western-style), has gradually become mainstream, and since the 1980s, especially for the futuristic architecture that is transforming many Chinese cities.



After parade, Nov. 1918





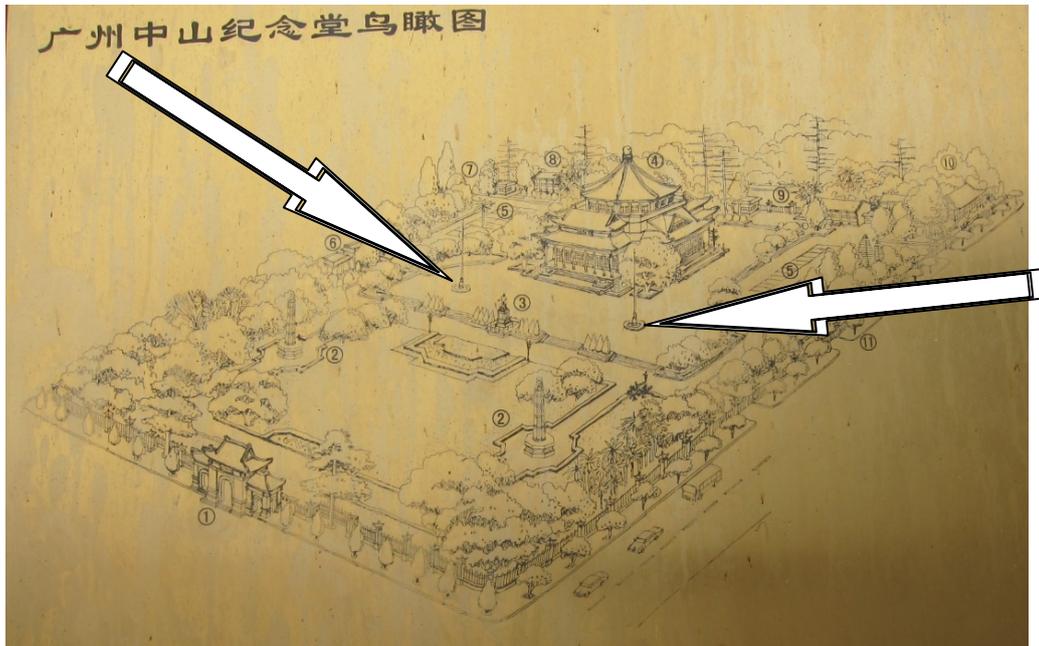
In 1929, Beijing,
The Palace Museum,
very high flagpole

Double flagpoles in front of antique buildings and imitated antique buildings

1. Many governmental and public institution prefer a single flagpole on the central axis;
2. Flagpoles on both sides of the central axis are more often used among the people, which can be seen as inheriting the time-honoured tradition; and
3. And setting a single flagpole on a lateral side of the central axis is accepted, whose principle for location selecting is "the right side is better", aiming at solving the conflict between new and old cultures and maintaining some traditions.



Built in 1931, Guangzhou, Sun Zhongshan Memorial Hall



Aerial view for Sun Zhongshan Memorial Hall

Today the essentially foreign practice of a single flag pole, a single cluster of poles and location directly in front of the building is widely followed in construction of government and military buildings, schools and even cultural institutions. This is a direct reflection of the spread of wider display of national flags and the impact of cultural flag use - and nationalism - the world over. With the rising status of the national flag, especially in China, its supremacy, uniqueness and centrality are deeply understood by citizens. Erecting and locating a single flag pole right in front of Western-style buildings is now widely accepted as the default practice. However, the practice of a single flag pole in front of both old and new Chinese architecture, is problematic in terms of national heritage and visual balance.



Built in 1933, Shanghai Government Building.



Built in 1934, Guangzhou Government Building.

Despite the Revolution of 1911 and its change of flag, the traditional Chinese practice of displaying the flag was still evident in the 1930s. The City Hall of Shanghai and Zhongshan Memorial Hall in Guangzhou are excellent examples, as is the Beijing Art Museum of China built in the 1950s. However there have been practically no new structures with the traditional double flag-poles since then. The new prevailing style, practically universal since the 1980s - that is, one flag pole only and in the centre of the forecourt - can be seen in the Shaanxi History Museum.

At least in religious architecture, and in contrast to the new style of public architecture in China, the double poles of Chinese folk tradition persist. Examples can be seen in the Hongfu Temple in Guiyang, the Bailin in Zhao County, the Cien in Xi'an and elsewhere.

Apart from these relative rarities, single flag pole for public buildings of traditional Chinese style is entrenched and widely accepted. An inevitable result of a new flag culture in China, and seems here to stay.

Even so, traditional Chinese (i.e., pre-1949) architecture of religious buildings preferred double poles or a single pole - but to the side, with the emphasis on the complete and un-trammelled view of the building, and defining the hierarchy of values, the building predominating, the flag display ancillary and subordinate.



**Beijing Xinhuaamen,
the location of Central
Government**



Tian'anmen Square Flagpole, Beijing



Chongqing People's Auditorium, built in 1954



Taipei Palace Museum, built in 1965



Shaanxi History Museum, built in 1991

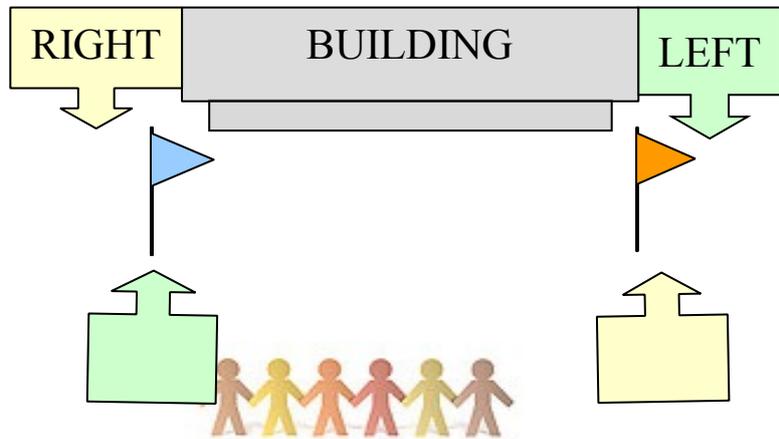


Aerial view for Shaanxi History Museum

Guilin, Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)
 Palace of King of Jingjiang,
 the RIGHT pole.



右边是上位
 建筑是主体
 建筑右侧旗杆为上位



The RIGHT side is better.
 Building is subject.
 The flagpole of building
 the right side is FIRST





**Presidential Palace of Republic of Korea,
the RIGHT poles**



China Art Museum in Beijing, built in 1962

There is also a hierarchy of importance between the flag poles themselves, especially where there are two. The right pole of such twin-sets is regarded as the main and allows precedence to the national flag. A single pole on the right of the building (that is, the viewers' left) displays the national or other flags, and so respects the beauty of tradition while accommodating existing regulations on flying flags.

Within the rich and expanding flag display around the world, that variation is also the embodiment of cultural diversity. In that context, deeper study and the proper use of Chinese traditional flagpoles is part of the future unfolding of that culture.



RIGHT



LEFT

Xilai Temple in Los Angeles, CA, US, built in 1988

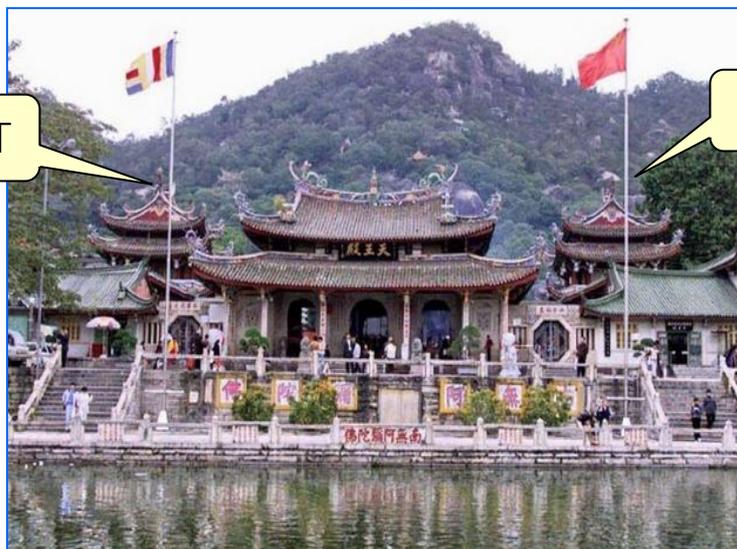
RIGHT



LEFT

**Guiyang,
Hongfu Temple Festival**

RIGHT



LEFT

Buddhism Temple in South China

Conclusion

1. On both sides of the central axis of a Chinese antique building or imitated antique building, we can adopt a single flagpole or double flagpoles with unconfined positions, and double flagpoles are preferable, which can embody the traditions and emphasize the image of the building
2. Governmental flagpoles have a rather strong international nature, brimming with western cultural elements, while non-governmental flagpoles can hold more traditions. As the differences between governmental flagpoles and non-governmental ones are acceptable and the diversified flagpole culture keeps the values of all flagpoles, we must cherish that.
3. The re-confirmation of "the right side is the better" in the oriental world, should abide by historical traditions.



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