

Grand Tour Report 2018

Architecture of Nara

Introduction:

Nara was the capital of Japan from 710 to 794 (Nara period). In that time, many architecture follow the style of the traditional Chinese building and temples. Until nowadays, Nara is still infame of its temples and shrines. For example, in 1998, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara becomes one of the World Heritage. This shows the architecture of temples in Nara are being well-preserved and protected by the Japan Government.

Due to the historical factors, after 794, the capital of Japan moved to Kyoto. Reports reveal that there are no destruction and changes are made on those building from 794. Therefore, Nara's buildings usually are much more traditional than other cities. There are 3 shrines and 25 temples in Nara, it is because during 710-794, Buddhism spread to Japan from China, at that time, many temples were built, being the capital, large numbers of temples were established. Buddhism was spread from China, therefore, most of the temples followed the building style of Chinese traditional building methods, for example, the skill of "Mortise and Tenon Joint".

Our group chose to investigate the architecture of Nara because it has similar appearance to the Chinese buildings, however, they are more traditional than those buildings in China. In fact, after the Sino-Japanese War and the battle with Eight-Nation Alliance, many historical buildings were destroyed. Most of the Chinese buildings were rebuilt and modernized. Unlike China, Nara's buildings are well-preserved because they were not the battlefield in most of the wars. Therefore, the original appearance of those buildings can be kept. So they are quite different when compared with the Chinese buildings such as the Forbidden City in China. The second reason is that Nara is the only place in overseas which preserves Chinese traditional architecture style.

Methodology:

Both first-hand and second-hand resources were used in this report.

For first-hand information, questions were asked to our classmates. Through this we can obtain the common feeling of visitors towards Nara's architecture. Besides, we took photos of the temples of Nara during the tour in order to show the characteristics of Nara's buildings.

For second-hand information, we searched information regarding traditional Chinese buildings in order to show the similarities and differences between Chinese and Nara's architecture.

Literature Review:

The introduction of Buddhism in Japan during the sixth century was a catalyst for large-scale temple building using complicated techniques in wood. Influence from the Chinese Tang and Sui Dynasties led to the foundation of the first permanent capital in Nara. Its checkerboard street layout used the Chinese capital of Chang'an as a template for its design. A gradual increase in the size of buildings led to standard units of measurement as well as refinements in layout and garden design. The introduction of the tea ceremony emphasized simplicity and modest design as a counterpoint to the excesses of the aristocracy.

The Nara period (710 – 784), also known as the Tempyō period, marks the apex of concentrated Japanese efforts to emulate Chinese cultural and political models. Official Japanese contact with Tang China had dropped off after the defeat of the Japanese in 663 by combined Tang and Silla forces. However, Japanese court perception of the governing effectiveness of the centralized Chinese state sparked renewal of relationships with the mainland at many levels. The new capital city was modeled after the Tang capital at Chang'an, and complex legal codifications based on the Chinese system established an idealized order of social relationships and obligations. Thus, a hierarchical society was established, in symbolic and real terms, with all power proceeding from the emperor. The integration of religion into this scheme fixed a properly understood relationship between spiritual and earthly authority. Secular authority ultimately drew its power from this relationship. The ever more precise articulation of these notions further positioned Buddhism to receive massive governmental support.

Analysis:

Part 1: Report

Japan is renowned for being a flourishing central shopping country, but there is something more. Nara, the city which is known as “the Hometown of Japanese Culture”, keeps some of the features of ancient Japan. When it comes to Nara’s most iconic building what immediately springs to mind is Todai-ji Temple. Of course, it also becomes one of the enchanting attractions in our grand tour.

Through having interview with our classmates and the visitors from other countries, we found that most of the students think that the architectures in Nara is very similar to the traditional Chinese buildings. Some of them even said “It seems we are turning back the clock to time of Tang dynasty when we entered this city.” One of the visitor said that he was impressed by the majestic building-- Todai-ji Temple. “Although it is only $\frac{2}{3}$ of the size of the original temple from 10th century, it was awe-inspiring! The buddha status is magnificent and it is really worth going !” said by a visitor from Canada. More than half of the students think that the best time to enjoy the relaxing journey in Nara is probably the Spring, especially when the cherry blossoms illuminate the skyline and the temples in Nara. “After all, what can stand comparison with immersing yourself in the glamorous scene after escaping from a hectic life in Hong Kong?” said by one of the students.

According to the interview, more than 80% of the visitors are saying that it is worth going to Nara, and they will recommend their friends to go. This shows that Nara is such a place loved by visitors all over the world, and it’s picturesque scene attracted every visitor.

Part 2: Analysis

As might be expected, the result of the interviews shows that most of the visitors are impressed by the aesthetic design and the architecture technique used in the buildings in Nara. Most of the visitors cannot imagine that such majestic buildings were built in 10 century.

There are visitors said that the buildings in Nara are very similar to the ancient Chinese architectures. This is because during Nara Period, cultural exchange between Japan and Tang dynasty increased, paintings and sculptures during the period came to be modeled closely on the style of the contemporary Tang dynasty. Apart from that, emperors in Tang dynasty sent different sculptures, including the buddhists shown in Todai-ji Temple, to Japan. Buddhism in Japan had the stamp of Tang control, according to some literature reviews, ten Buddhist masters who had studied in Tang China as well as the superintendents placed in charge of temple property, extended state control over all B

uddhist matters. Therefore, needless to say, the building style and even the sculptures in Todai-ji Temple is similar to the ancient Chinese buildings.

Some of the visitors also surprised by the building technique used in Nara Period. Take Todai-ji Temple as an example, although the workers did not use a single nail but only wood when building the temple, the main construction of the temple can still be stood firmly in 21th century. Actually, this is because the workers at the time used a technique called “Mortise and tenon”, it is a type of joint that connects two pieces of wood or other materials. This technique is invented by Chinese carpenter called Lu Ban, and is spread to Japan during Han dynasty. This technique can ensure the building sustain for a longer time, even longer than the building using a hammer and nail.

Through analyzing the interviews and the literature reviews, it shows that the ancient Japanese architecture style is mainly based on the traditional Chinese architecture style. With the hard work of the posterities, the skills and architecture style passed from China is being refined already, and is developed into a brand new style, and becomes the legend around the world, the Japanese architecture style.

Conclusion:

From the above interview’s result, Nara’s architecture carried the characteristics of traditional Chinese buildings, which allowed the visitors to feel the environment of China and Nara back in the time. Because the temples in Nara is not as luxurious as those in China, it brings a new experience to the visitors.

Reflection:

After going to Nara, I learnt a lot about the culture of Japan. When I visited Todaiji Temple, I was shocked by the giant temple and the appearance of it. Its width is 57 meters and 50 meters high. Originally I thought entering a temple in Japan was very casual and there was no need to follow some traditions. But later I found I was mistaken by TV programmes, there are many rituals that I should follow. For example, I needed to dedicate JPY\$5, worship the Buddha for protection and light incense in front of the entrance of the temple before I went in.

In the temple, I did not feel bored . There was a big Buddha which is 15 meter tall named Vairocana. Every visitor in the temple was worshiping it, it was shocking. There is a small hole on the pillar, there is a saying that if a person climbs through it, he will be healthy, successful and lucky. Luckily I could pass through the hole, I hope the saying comes true.

The thing that amazed me most was the deer feeding experience in Nara Park. It was remarkable and definitely one of the unforgettable memories in my life. It was the first time that I see a real deer in real life. They were cute and pretty. When they saw my hand holding food, their reactions were very cute. Even some of them bowed to me and kept following me. I was excited but also scared, because some of the aggressive deer even rammed me and lapped me. Although my clothes became dirty, I think it is worthy.

Nara Park is a great place to visit since it is very big in scale. If I decided to go to Japan again, I must choose to visit Nara and Nara Park one more time

Appendix:

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