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## **Lo studio di architettura Calatroni, Hsieh & Co. Una partnership italo-cinese a Shanghai negli anni Venti e Trenta**

### **Keywords**

History of Architecture, China, Shanghai, Italians Abroad, Urban History

### **Abstract**

The architecture studio Calatroni, Hsieh & Co. was founded in Shanghai in 1927. Working in tandem, Edison Calatroni, from Cremona, and Ernyi Hsieh, from Hangzhou, designed upscale residences and apartment houses for Chinese and foreign clients. Their projects expressed wildly diverse international influences but had inventive plans, a high level of crafted finishes and an early application of modern amenities. Their buildings are recognized as important built heritage, but the team that created them has remained largely anonymous. The following research traces the professional biographies of Calatroni, Hsieh and their colleagues in the wider context of the international treaty port. The article highlights the stylistic qualities of the firm's works and their contribution to the Asian Art Deco movement.

### **Biography**

Katya Knyazeva, from Novosibirsk, Russia, is a historian and a journalist with a focus on urban form, heritage preservation and the Russian diaspora in old Shanghai. She is the author of the two-volume historical and photographic atlas *Shanghai Old Town. Topography of a Phantom City* (Suzhou Creek Press, 2015 and 2018). Her articles on history and architecture appear in international media and her blog <http://avezink.livejournal.com>. Her academic writing can be found in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society China*, *Global History and Built Heritage*. In 2024, Knyazeva received her PhD at the University of Eastern Piedmont, Italy.

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## The Architecture Studio Calatroni, Hsieh & Co.: An Italian-Chinese Partnership in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s

### Introduction

In the first half of the twentieth century, Shanghai was a fast-developing global metropolis with intersecting European and Asian cultures. As the city rapidly expanded, foreign and Chinese construction firms competed for ambitious projects that would inscribe a distinctive urban form on the rising city. The architectural company Calatroni, Hsieh and Co., active the 1920s and 1930s, was a unique Sino-Italian partnership that created a number of attractive buildings that are still prominent features of Shanghai's built landscape. The study of the professional careers of Edison Calatroni and Ernyi Hsieh provides an important addendum to the knowledge of cross-cultural collaboration in early twentieth-century China.

Research on the history of Shanghai architecture inevitably confronts limitations regarding primary sources. The access to Shanghai Urban Construction Archive (*Shanghai Chengshi Jianshe Dang'anguan*) – the main aggregator of project documentation, blueprints, drawings, photographs and ownership records prior to 1949 – is permitted only to owners of individual properties and their representatives. Presumably, this helps avoid mass contestation of the nationalization of private assets by the Communist government in the 1950s. The present study relies primarily on information from English and Chinese-language periodicals, industry publications, city directories and communication with descendants of Ernyi Hsieh.

### Italians in Shanghai

Shanghai, a river port in the Yangtze River delta, began a period of accelerated development after the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1843, in the aftermath of the First Opium War, when imperial China was forced to open several cities for foreign trade. European and American diplomats, missionaries and traders began to settle in Shanghai and exploit new opportunities arising from the commerce with China.

In the decades that followed, two scarcely inhabited areas outside the walled Chinese City were leased in perpetuity to foreign authorities, becoming the International Settlement and the French Concession. Governed independently of the Chinese administration, they became zones of free enterprise and foreign investment, generating modern practices that later spread to the rest of China. Expanding infrastructure, weak local government and unlimited economic opportunities attracted



entrepreneurial Chinese and foreigners, and by the 1920s Shanghai became one of the largest cities in the world. The European urban planning and international architectural styles characterized the city's central districts and contributed to its global perception as a forward-looking metropolis. Compared to other Europeans, Italians in Shanghai were a small group, never exceeding 200 people until the 1930s. For comparison, Shanghai's largest foreign communities in 1935 – the British, the Japanese, and the Russians – numbered ten, twenty, and twenty-five thousand persons respectively. After the colonial expansion of Italy into East Africa, the Italian presence in Asia began to increase, reaching its peak in 1945, with over 1,000 Italians registered in Shanghai<sup>1</sup>. The Chinese population of the two foreign settlements was at all times much more numerous: in 1935 it exceeded 1.5 million, with another 2 million in the Chinese-governed areas – or sixty times the number of all the foreigners residing in Shanghai<sup>2</sup>.

7.1

In spite of their small numbers, Shanghai's Italians had a connection to China going back centuries. Catholic missionaries were the first Westerners to settle in the city at the turn of the seventeenth century, having come to spread Christianity in the region. Decades of interaction of Italian missionaries with Chinese scholars and officials resulted in Catholicism taking a strong hold in the region. Networks of support, political influence and lasting wealth of old Catholic families are perceptible even today. The legacy of that seventeenth-century collaboration also included the transformation of a traditional residential building in the walled city of Shanghai into the Church of the One Savior (*Jingyitang*) in 1640. It became the first large-scale Catholic church in the city and stayed in operation until the end of the 1940s.

The designation of Shanghai as a treaty port in 1843 brought new opportunities for the expansion of the Catholic Church and European trade interests. Exploiting a network long established by the Jesuits, Italian silkworm brokers came to Shanghai to connect to silkworm egg suppliers from Japan and East China<sup>3</sup>. The official diplomatic relationship between the Kingdom of Italy and the Chinese Empire was established in 1866, with the signing of the first Sino-Italian Treaty. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 accelerated the transit of goods between the Far East and Europe, and the Italian community in Shanghai grew to include a variety of traders, diplomats, and military personnel<sup>4</sup>. Entrepreneurs, mostly from Lombardy, sought business opportunities and cheap labor, with silk production as their primary line of business. One example is Daniele Beretta,

<sup>1</sup> Christian Henriot, Shi Lu, and Charlotte Aubrun, *The Population of Shanghai (1865-1953)* (Brill, 2019), 174.

<sup>2</sup> Henriot, *Population of Shanghai*, 95-97.

<sup>3</sup> Stefano Piastra, "The Italian community in 'Old Shanghai' (1842-1941)", in *Contact Zones in China. Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Merle Schatz, Laura De Giorgi and Peter Ludes (De Gruyter, 2020), 37.

<sup>4</sup> Piastra, "The Italian community", 38.

who arrived in Shanghai in 1889 and managed the Ewo Steam Silk Filature, which employed more than one thousand people, including six Italian female overseers<sup>5</sup>.

In the 1910s, when Shanghai entered a phase of active urban construction and development, Italians began to import construction materials and decorative sculpture. Capitalizing on their nation's reputation for art and craftsmanship, they introduced high-end marble work to Shanghai. The Yangtze region was poor in natural stone, and builders had to rely on brick, cement and wood for construction and decor. The use of imported marble communicated opulence and refined taste and was showcased in the interiors of foreign company headquarters, consulates and hotels on the city's waterfront (Bund). Eventually, decorative marble from Italy found its way into most prestigious public buildings and homes throughout the city.

The sculptor G. Finocchiaro, in Shanghai since 1903, had a supply network that included quarries in Pietrasanta, Massa Carrara and Livorno. He decorated the residence of the Jewish magnate Ellie Kadoorie, in 1924. Vast quantities of grey, black and yellow Siena marble, used in the interior, earned the building the nickname "Marble Hall". In 1928, Finocchiaro's Italian Marble Works furnished the décor of the Joint Savings Society. The architect L. E. Hudec's deliberate choice was to "create the effect of richness" only by color contrasts, rather than through volumes or patterns. Finocchiaro achieved this by combining *carrara venato* marble on the walls with spotted ochre *cervellata* on the counters and columns<sup>6</sup>. The result was an "overpowering aggregation" of colors "blended so skillfully to make this banking hall a thing of beauty"<sup>7</sup>.

The company of B. Bertucci, which claimed to be the oldest marble importer, supplied materials for large buildings of Chinese conglomerates, like the Continental Bank (1933). The cost of the materials published in the press was a testament to the luxury and ambition of this project. In another building – Shanghai Mercantile Bank (1933), designed by the Allied Architects – Bertucci used a combination of Chinese veinous black marble with Italian white-and-grey *arabescato* for the entrance steps and flooring, rose-colored *Chiampo rosa* for the counters and white *Carrara* for the interior staircase<sup>8</sup>.

With the growth of the construction industry, dealers of marble and decorative sculpture multiplied. B. Mosca, of Cement Tile Works, who in the 1910s was virtually the only importer of Carrara marble, later had to compete with G. Burigotto's company, G. Finocchiaro's Italian Marble Works, B. Bertucci's China Marble Works and B. Jacono's Carrara Marble Works. In the mid-1930s, the list of Italian stone and sculpture specialists included also A. Massa, R. Bigazzi and A. Martelli, with additional competition from non-Italians: the Chinese firm Shanghai Marble Co., Russian-run Italian-French Marble Co., Greek Industrial Marble works, and others<sup>9</sup>.

Other lines of business where Italians maintained their primacy were imported wines and provisions, confectionary business, and classical music<sup>10</sup>. The Italian government encouraged commercial activity in China and rewarded activists with incentives and honorary titles<sup>11</sup>. In the architectural profession, however, Italians were not widely represented. Paolo Chelazzi (1904–1968) is the best-known Shanghai-based Italian architect, even though few of his works survive today. He built several structures in Tientsin (Tianjin) in North China, where Italy held a concession since 1901 and where architects were mandated to give buildings "a superior type of exterior"<sup>12</sup>. Chelazzi's Italian Club

<sup>5</sup> Arnold Wright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of Hongkong, Shanghai, and Other Treaty Ports of China* (Lloyd's Greater Britain Pub. Co, 1908), 573.

<sup>6</sup> "New Structure Opened to Public Year After Plans Win Competition", *China Press*, May 20, 1928, C1.

<sup>7</sup> "Contractors Who Aided in Building this Handsome Structure", *China Press*, May 20, 1928, C5.

<sup>8</sup> "New Shanghai Mercantile Bank Ready for Occupancy within Short Period", *China Press*, June 22, 1933, A1-A2.

<sup>9</sup> *Shanghai Directory* (1910-1941).

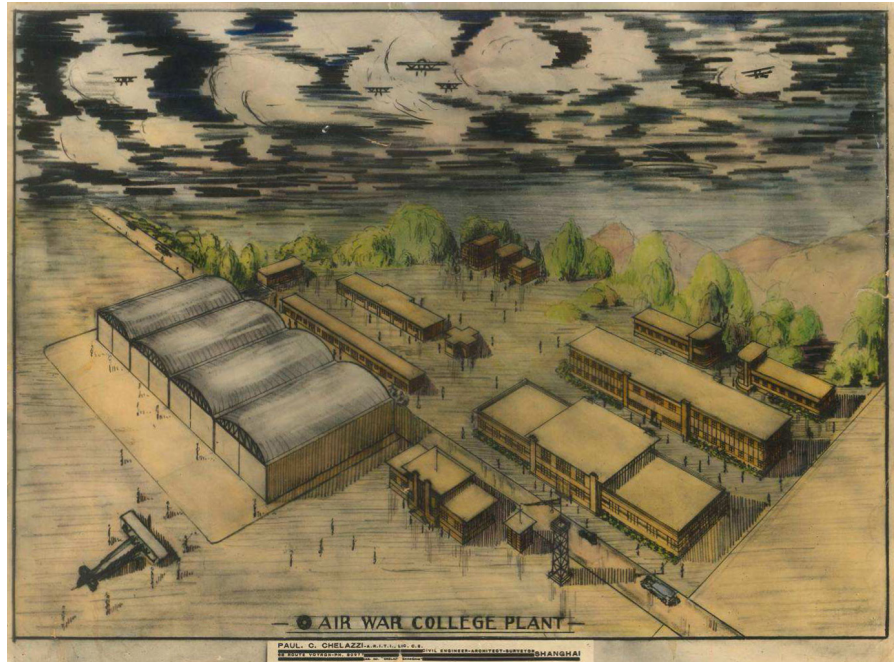
<sup>10</sup> *A Guide to Catholic Shanghai* (Tou-se-we Press, 1937), 69.

<sup>11</sup> "Mr. G. F. Righini", *North-China Herald*, May 1, 1940, 178.

<sup>12</sup> Maurizio Marinelli, "Finding the Imagined Motherland in China: The Italian Experience in Tianjin", *Provincial China*, 3 (1) (2011), 90.

## 7.2

Plan of the Air War College by Paolo Chelazzi. 1931. Fausto Giovannardi.



(*Casa d'Italia*) on Via Roma in Tianjin, had a distinctly modernist appearance, as did the Sino-Italian National Aircraft Works, in Nanchang<sup>13</sup>. His projects for a hospital in Tianjin's British Concession and a new Italian Consulate for Shanghai were never realized. As a result, the only extant buildings in Shanghai that can be attributed to Italians are the works of Calatroni and Hsieh.

3.2

### The 1920s: Calatroni and Hsieh

Edison Calatroni was born in Cremona on March 7, 1898, in the family of Maria Slerca and Giuseppe Calatroni; his engineer father authored several scientific publications. Trained as a pilot, the young Calatroni served as a Lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers during the First World War. In 1920 he was in Japan, organizing the Osaka leg of the Rome-Tokyo Raid, the famous long-distance air expedition, during which two Italian aviators flying wooden airplanes reached Japan. Staying in the Far East, Calatroni enrolled in the University of Hong Kong and graduated in 1923 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Engineering<sup>14</sup>. He moved to Shanghai and took the position of Engineer at the Italian Consulate, which he held until 1930<sup>15</sup>.

7.3

Ernyi Hsieh (birthname Hsueh Shengtsu, or Xue Shengzu in modern orthography) was born on May 17, 1896, in Qiantang, now part of Hangzhou, near Shanghai. Children of Chinese elite often went abroad for higher education, and in 1914 Hsieh enrolled in the Rensselaer Polytechnic University, USA, graduating in 1918 as an Engineer. In 1919, he traveled to France with a delegation of Chinese students to promote literacy among tens of thousands of Chinese migrant laborers working there since the First World War. Upon his return to the USA, he continued to study engineering and received his PhD in 1922.

7.4

Hsieh interned at American Bridge Company and Penn Bridge Corporation and at one point served as Assistant Engineer to J. A. L. Waddell, a famous designer of bridges. Waddell traveled to China in 1921 to consult the Chinese government on the construction of railway bridges across the Yellow River. Returning to Shanghai, Hsieh joined the Continental Corporation of China (*Liuhe Gongsì*) as Chief Engineer, eventually becoming one of its directors. He married the eldest daughter of the manager of a prominent auction house, further securing his connections to Shanghai's business elite<sup>16</sup>. Hsieh's study abroad and subsequent work in Shanghai makes him part of a lineage of architects and engineers who, collectively, defined modern architectural profession in China. His colleagues

<sup>13</sup> Fausto Giovannardi, *Sulle tracce di Paolo Chelazzi. Vol. 1. Paul Chelazzi e il sogno degli archi sospesi* (2017).

<sup>14</sup> "Hongkong University: Twelfth Congregation", *South China Morning Post*, June 9, 1923, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Archivio Storico Intesa Sanpaolo, Patrimonio Banca Commerciale Italiana (ASI-BCI), Carte di Alberto D'Agostino (DAGO), cart. 3, fasc. Calatroni.

<sup>16</sup> "Wedding", *China Press*, November 28, 1923, 3.



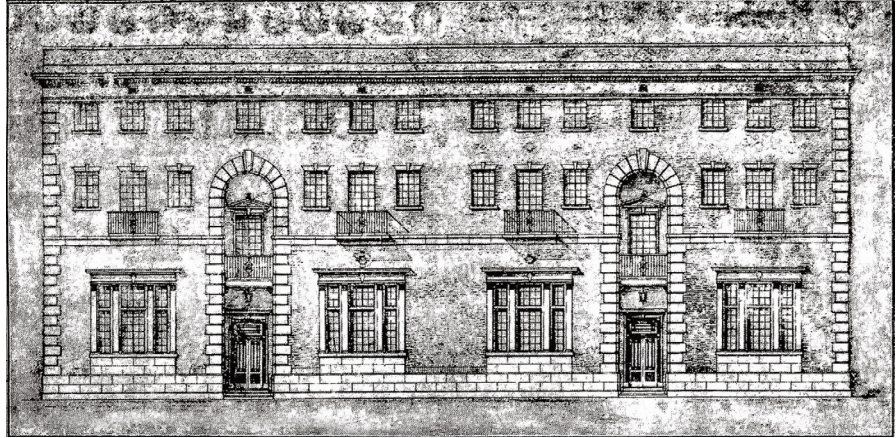
7.3

Japanese aviators welcoming Italians during the Rome-To-kyo expedition, 1920. Library of Congress.



7.4

Class of 1918 at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute; two Chinese students, Shih and Hsieh, are on the right. RPI Archive.



were T. Chuang (Zhuang Jun), Doon Dayu (Dong Dayou), Poy Gum Lee, Robert Fan (Fan Wenzhao), Zhao Shen, Yang Tingbao, Fohjien Godfrey Ede (Xi Fuquan) and Luke Him Sau (Lu Qianshou). Having learned design principles of Parisian École des Beaux-Arts in American universities, these architects applied them to Chinese conditions<sup>17</sup>. Their works interwove traditional Chinese motifs with elements of International Art Deco to produce new national architecture with a strong identity. Among the flagship projects of this movement were Fitch Memorial Church (S. J. Young, 1928), Chinese YMCA and YWCA buildings (Poy Gum Lee, 1931 and 1932), the Civic Center ensemble (Doon Dayu, 1933–1935), Bank of China (Luke Him Sau, 1937) and others.

But in spite of the growing number of qualified local architects, Shanghai's foreign concessions remained an environment that privileged foreign professionals over the Chinese<sup>18</sup>. Land ownership and administrative power were concentrated in the hands of the Westerners, although investment capital and human resources were often controlled by the rising Chinese bourgeoisie. To operate in this field, Chinese professionals looked for employment at foreign-run firms or partnered with foreign architects.

In September 1927, the local press announced the creation of the partnership Calatroni and Hsieh, "for general practice in Architectural, Construction and Structural Engineering"<sup>19</sup>. The studio was on the fifth floor of the Edward Ezra Building in downtown business quarter, at 14 Kiukiang (Jiujiang) Road. The new Sino-Italian firm quickly became a successful player in the construction boom that was transforming the foreign settlements since the end of the First World War. The bi-national nature of the partnership allowed it to secure exclusive foreign property deals while simultaneously tapping into local networks of investors, suppliers and contractors.

Calatroni and Hsieh's first projects were commissioned by the young entrepreneur Sun Chunsheng, whose wealth came from running his family's property business. Having acquired several lots in the undeveloped western end of the International Settlement, Sun used his company, Central Realty (*Jinxing Yingye Gongsì*), to create a neighborhood of terraced residential compounds for Chinese middle-class and apartment buildings for foreign occupants. Sun's projects had titles referring to his personal name (Chunsheng), surname (Sun) and the reverse translation of the English word "sun" into Chinese (*yang*). Calatroni and Hsieh's first project for Sun – the apartment house Sun Court, on Weihaiwei Road – embedded shining suns into the ornamental motifs on the façade<sup>20</sup>.

In September 1928, when the Sun Court opened, there were only a dozen apartment houses in the city. Considered a novel form of living and only suitable for foreign residents, they, however, doubled in number each year<sup>21</sup>. The British paper *The North-China Daily News* called Sun Court a fine addition to the city's residential landscape<sup>22</sup>. The building's hybrid qualities included its tranquil location "away from the traffic and yet proximate to town" and the newest technological equipment, such as central oil heating, garbage incinerators, electric cookers, hot and cold running water, modern plumbing, etc.<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey W. Cody, Nancy S. Steinhardt and Tony Atkin, eds., *Chinese Architecture and the Beaux-Arts* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Cody, Steinhardt and Atkin, *Chinese Architecture*, 214.

<sup>19</sup> "Notice", *China Press*, September 3, 1927, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Shunsheng Xue, Chenghao Lou, eds., *Lao Shanghai Jingdian Gongyu [Old Apartment Houses in Shanghai]* (Tongji University Press, 2005), 95.

<sup>21</sup> *Shanghai Directory* (1927, 1928, 1929, 1930).

<sup>22</sup> "New Flat Building in Weihaiwei Rd", *North-China Daily News*, August 2, 1928, 11.

<sup>23</sup> "Another Modern Apartment Building Nearing Completion", *China Press*, January 22, 1928, 4.



## 7.6

Sun Court on Weihai Road in our times, 2025. Courtesy of Jad Arsan.

The inspiration for some features of Sun Court could be traced to Italian urban lifestyle. A fully enclosed courtyard in the place of usual storage sheds and garages ensured good ventilation in each apartment and gave residents a protected communal garden. A marble fountain was installed in the center of the courtyard, with palm trees planted on the lawn. The roof garden included a belvedere, for admiring the views and doing “gentle exercise”.

Out of 31 apartments, several had two floors, with the bedrooms positioned above the living rooms, in imitation of private houses. Large salons on the lower floors had double ceiling height and extra tall windows with overhanging balconies with a winding staircase<sup>24</sup>. All apartments combined hardwood floors in the living areas and mosaic floors in other rooms.

Foreign residents ordinarily employed live-in Chinese servants; their sleeping quarters were located in each apartment and in the adjacent four-story building. That building – Santa Apartments – was completed in 1929 on the narrow lot west of Sun Court. Less luxurious than its neighbor, it advertised its “spacious one and two-room flats with bath, kitchen, through draught and modern conveniences”<sup>25</sup>. In compensation for reduced floor area, the rooms in Santa Apartments had 3.5-meter ceilings and large casement windows. Like in Sun Court, facilities included hot and cold tap water and central heating.

Calatroni and Hsieh acted as rental agents for their projects, soliciting tenants on the pages of local English-language newspapers. An ideal prospective renter was a British or American bachelor, employed at a foreign firm, who valued centrality, convenience and modern comforts. But with foreigners comprising less than 2% of Shanghai’s population, architectural firms and contractors increasingly looked to sell and rent to Chinese clients.

The wealthiest Chinese prized privacy and ample space for large families and staffs of servants; they commissioned large standalone mansions, surrounded by gardens and tall walls. These villas were in a blend of Western styles with traditional Chinese features (the latter included the mandatory central axial symmetry and a southern exposure). Constructed in the peripheral

<sup>24</sup> “New Flat Building”, *North-China Daily News*, August 2, 1928, 11.

<sup>25</sup> “To Let: Santa Apartments”, *China Press*, August 21, 1929, 17.



parts of the French Concession and International Settlement, these homes benefitted from low population density and light traffic.

Calatroni and Hsieh built several such residences. In 1929, they erected a villa for Sao-tseng Sze (Shi Zhaocong) on Avenue Road, in the International Settlement. Sze had had a long career as a government official, entrepreneur and philanthropist. A devout Buddhist, he named his house Garden of Awareness (*Jueyuan*). The residence, however, had none of the traditional Chinese characteristics: the white-stucco mansion in a neoclassical style was a two-story reinforced concrete structure. A gallery with three rounded arches sheltered the central porch and supported a balcony. A sloped mansard roof with multiple chimneys was the only feature visible from the street, shielded by the lush garden and cast-iron fence<sup>26</sup>.

The preference for western styles in Shanghai stemmed from the long-time dominance of Westerners in the architectural profession. First British, French and American settlers in post-1843 Shanghai lived in ordinary Chinese houses of the time, but deemed them uncomfortable and unsafe. As soon as the limits of the concessions were defined, Westerners began to construct their own homes, offices and warehouses there. Designed by British architects and executed by Chinese contractors, these buildings combined residential quarters, offices and storage rooms under one roof. Large windows and covered galleries (verandas) on each floor proved poorly suited to cold winters. The labeling of this architecture as colonial, “compradoric” and “godownic” reflected its utilitarian origin: “compradore” was the Chinese intermediary of a foreign business, while “godown” meant a warehouse<sup>27</sup>.

With the expansion of the International Settlement and the mandatory use of fireproof materials, architects shunned the “compradoric” in favor of contemporary European styles. The city’s first professional architect, George Strachan, practicing since 1849, infused his creations with elements of Classical Revival, such as colonnaded porches, pilasters and pediments, then popular in England. Soon most foreign architects embraced the Italian neo-renaissance style, which proved best at communicating permanence, up-to-datedness and cultural superiority that the rising treaty port and metropolis aspired to.

Neo-renaissance buildings first appeared on the Bund. They were marked by central symmetry, columns and pilasters on the façade and preference for stucco, plasterwork and marble in the exterior and interior. Among the earliest examples are Russo-Chinese Bank (H. Becker, 1902) – once pronounced the most beautiful bank building in China<sup>28</sup> – and Shanghai Club (R. B. Moorehead, 1906), whose monumental facade incorporated a two-storey-high Ionic columnar order defining its *piano nobile*, or main floor area<sup>29</sup>. Both buildings pioneered the use of reinforced concrete.

The spread of new technologies allowed builders to overcome the subsidence of Shanghai soil and erect taller structures. The granite-faced neo-renaissance Banque de l’Indo-Chine (Atkinson and Dallas, 1914) was among the first Bund buildings to use a raft to spread weight evenly and prevent sinking. Another neo-renaissance office – Union Insurance Building (Palmer and Turner, 1915) – rested on steel framework, like an American skyscraper; an effect emphasized by vertical lines on the façade. A few steps away from the Bund, the International Savings Society, designed

<sup>26</sup> Shiling Zheng, *Shanghai Jindai Jianzhu Fengge [The Evolution of Shanghai Architecture in Modern Times]* (Tongji University Press, 2019), 495.

<sup>27</sup> Peter G. Rowe and Seng Kuan, *Architectural Encounters with Essence and Form in Modern China* (MIT Press, 2002), 38.

<sup>28</sup> “The New Russo-Chinese Bank Building”, *North-China Herald*, October 29, 1902, 915.

<sup>29</sup> Rowe and Kuan, *Architectural Encounters*, 33

by the American R. A. Curry in 1919, drew its inspiration from Palazzo Valmarana, in Vicenza. Its symmetrical façade was intersected by Corinthian pilasters spanning two floors, while Doric half-columns of artificial marble propped the vaulted ceiling inside<sup>30</sup>.

In the decade when Calatroni and Hsieh began their activity, Italian neo-renaissance remained the default choice for commercial properties projecting top quality and class. One of the largest developers – Shanghai Land Investment Co. – placed a *campanile* above the roof of their downtown warehouse, Lyceum Godown (Bright Fraser, 1927). But with so many instances, the individuation of this architecture began to fade. The sprawling headquarters of Jardine, Matheson and Co. (A. W. Graham-Brown, 1922) on the Bund, with its rusticated double-storied base, granite columns running up three stories and a heavy entablature, made it indistinguishable from an American hotel<sup>31</sup>.

Away from the Bund, foreign homes and commercial buildings used a mixture of historicist styles. The collection of neoclassical porticos, ersatz Tudor facades, Spanish ‘Colonial Revival’, American Colonial, Baroque and Art Deco elements led some researchers to condemn them “as far removed in time and place as anywhere in the world at any time in history”<sup>32</sup> while others extolled the uniqueness of the Shanghai style of architecture<sup>33</sup>. Calatroni and Hsieh’s projects targeted a wide client base by balancing European and Chinese characteristics in accord with Shanghai-style eclecticism.

### The 1930s: Calatroni, Hsieh and Co.

The 1930s brought changes to the professional relationship between Calatroni and Hsieh. In October 1931, the accountant Peter James (Pedro Jaimes) Barrera (1891–1956) became partner in the firm. A couple of years earlier, the lawyer Ferdinando Pasquale Musso (1879–1974) also joined the firm as a partner. Both were second-generation residents of the Far East. Musso, born in Hong Kong in the Italian Consul’s family, counted some of Shanghai opium mafiosi among his clients<sup>34</sup>. Like Calatroni, who joined the Fascist Party in 1925, the whole Musso family were enthusiastic supporters of Mussolini<sup>35</sup>.

In 1930, after almost ten years in China, Edison Calatroni departed for the USA. He formed the Caladon company, registered in Boston, and patented several inventions, including a compressor unit for refrigerator doors. He spent the rest of the 1930s traveling extensively, circulating between England, France, Canada and the United States. The police department of his native Cremona never lost track of him. Neither his Fascist Party membership nor his journalistic work for the *Regime Fascista* daily prevented his inclusion into the “list of subversives” in 1934, because of his contacts with the British and the French<sup>36</sup>.

The company, renamed Calatroni, Hsieh and Co., continued to broker real estate and land deals and to design buildings. In 1935, it presented a large residential complex in the central French Concession – Jubilee Court and Apartments. Named in honor of the Silver Jubilee of the British King George V and Queen Mary, this development was funded by a group of Chinese investors. The land was former part of the estate of the deceased Edward Ezra, a preeminent Baghdadi Jewish mogul, and Calatroni, Hsieh and Co. negotiated the deal and brought it to completion.

<sup>30</sup> “Another New Business Building for Shanghai”, *Millard’s Review of the Far East*, December 13, 1919, 87.

<sup>31</sup> “The Architect’s Luck”, *North-China Daily News*, March 15, 1929.

<sup>32</sup> Edward Denison and Guang Yu Ren, *Building Shanghai: The Story of China’s Gateway* (Wiley-Academy, 2006), 165.

<sup>33</sup> Lynn Pan, *Shanghai Style: Art and Design Between the Wars* (Sino United Publishing, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> John B. Powell, *My Twenty-Five Years In China* (The Macmillan Company, 1945), 92-93.

<sup>35</sup> Piero Ambrosio, *Nel Novero Dei Sovversivi: Vercellesi, Biellesi E Valsesiani Schedati Nel Casellario Politico Centrale: 1896-1945* (Istituto per la storia della Resistenza e della società contemporanea, 1996), 89.

<sup>36</sup> Ambrosio, *Nel Novero Dei Sovversivi*, 89.



7.7 Drawing of the Jubilee Court by Paul Rene Gruenbergue. *Shanghai Times*, July 25, 1935, 5.

7.8 Jubilee Court in our times. Courtesy of Kat Tarukwasha.

The company built Jubilee Court (11 two-story townhouses with gardens) and Jubilee Court Apartments (4 five-story apartment blocks) for the widow of Edward Ezra, Mozelle Robinson Sopher, who invested in these properties and gave them the Chinese name of her husband's enterprise, *Xinkang Huayuan*<sup>37</sup>. The Associate Architect for this project was Paul René Gruenbergue-Elton (1892–1966), of Russian-Belgian provenance, who had designed a number of mansions and apartment houses in Shanghai.

A full-page architectural drawing of Jubilee Court Apartments, published in *Shanghai Times* in July 1935, highlighted the similarity to the enclosed courtyard of Sun Court, except now the buildings were pulled apart to create room for greenery. The drawing emphasized the trapezoid shapes of the buildings – each slightly different – and triangular penthouses, also varying in shape, on the fifth floor of each building<sup>38</sup>.

The Jubilee Court Apartments were praised for their “unusual ground arrangement and exposure”<sup>39</sup>. The circular layout defied the traditional east-west longitudinal orientation and the auspicious southern exposure preferred by Chinese residents. This illustrated a change in clients’ expectations over a decade. With the arrival of electric fans, air conditioning, modern sanitary amenities and ergonomic use of space, the problem of combating summer heat and housing numerous domestic servants became less of a priority.

These apartments were marketed to bachelors, young couples and small families. A typical dwelling had two bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, a pantry and a servants’ room. Family apartments spread over two levels – a signature feature of Calatroni, Hsieh and Co. The penthouses had ample terraces for home parties<sup>40</sup>.

North of the Jubilee Court Apartments, the Jubilee Court Duplexes sat on both sides of a straight central alley. Opened in September in 1935, the duplexes were advertised in local newspapers: “How to live in comfort, quietness, with evergreen surroundings, in the heart and best residential district in French Concession. The last word in modernism, thus eliminating complaints from conservative housewives”<sup>41</sup>.

7.7, 7.8

7.9

<sup>37</sup> “Big Land Deal in Shanghai”, *Israel’s Messenger*, September 5, 1930, 23.

<sup>38</sup> “Duplex House and Apartment Block Is New Feature”, *Shanghai Times*, July 25, 1935, 5.

<sup>39</sup> “Three Large Permits Granted In French Concession This Week”, *China Press*, December 13, 1934, 12.

<sup>40</sup> “Edward Ezra Estate Puts Up Modern Houses and Apartment Block in French Concession”, *Israel’s Messenger*, August 2, 1935, 4-5.

<sup>41</sup> “An Eye-Opener for Shanghai”, *China Press*, October 10, 1935, 5.



Each building contained two residences: two bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, two bathrooms, a kitchen, a pantry and servants' quarters. Among the important features there were copper mosquito screens on windows, built-in cupboards, parquet floors, private gardens and storage rooms. The garages for residents' vehicles were in the center of the compound. Similarly to Sun Court, greenery was important: young larches were planted in the gardens of each house.

A point of pride for the studio was the high quality of the materials. The Terrazzo Marble and Tile Co., which manufactured the flooring in Jubilee Court, was responsible for spreading the fashion for *terrazzo* in Shanghai. The company managed by Giovanni Burigotto had its own factory in Shanghai, where 10-ton blocks of stone imported from Italy were cut, shaped, polished and completed. Burigotto worked on such large and technologically advanced buildings as New Asia Hotel, Grand Theatre, Embankment Building and Chung Wai Bank<sup>42</sup>. His most prestigious commission was the foyer and the ballroom of the Park Hotel – East Asia's tallest skyscraper, built in 1934. The company fulfilled orders from outside of Shanghai as well, installing travertine and marble terrazzo in Beijing (then Peiping), Nanking and Hong Kong.

Calatroni, Hsieh and Co. maintained relationships with numerous Italian suppliers and artisans. They were the exclusive Shanghai agents for the company of the Florentine collector and marble specialist Raoul Bigazzi, based in Hong Kong, which specialized in marble statuary, bronze sculpture and wrought iron objects, imported from Florence or made locally. Bigazzi's crowning project was the execution of the decorative mosaic ceiling at the Shanghai and Hongkong Banking Corporation in Hong Kong, by the design of the Russian émigré artist Victor Podgoursky.

The two parts of the Jubilee Court development represented two different architectural styles, equally emblematic of 1930s Shanghai. The apartments were then called "modern", which is now classified as the Shanghai variety of the International Art Deco. Among the characteristic Art Deco elements there were horizontal banded windows wrapped around the corners, vertical and horizontal parallel lines intersecting the facades, oblique angles and tubular railings evoking ship's decks.

The duplexes were in the so-called "Spanish style" with contemporary Italian motifs. The leaded colored glass windows on the ground floor featured geometric Liberty motifs, popular in Italy at that time. The pebble mosaic in the backyards is similar to Genovese *risseu*.

The "Spanish style" first made an appearance in Shanghai in 1924, with the construction of the social venue Columbia Country Club, designed by the American architect Elliott Hazzard. His compatriot John Van Wie Bergamini observed that Episcopal missions built in Spanish and

7.9 Drawing of the Jubilee Court Duplexes. *Shanghai Sunday Times*, September 1, 1935, 5.

7.10 Stained glass window in Jubilee Court. 2025. Courtesy of Tina Mani Kanagaratnam.

7.10

<sup>42</sup> "Terrazzo Marble Adds to Color of New Hotel", *China Press*, December 1, 1934, B25.

Italian styles blended more harmonically with the Chinese landscape than other foreign styles<sup>43</sup>. Similarly to Enryi Hsieh, Chinese architects and engineers returning from study and work in the United States knew the popularity of Spanish-inspired residences in the two prosperous coastal states – California and Florida. Devised to deflect summer sun and mitigate the heat, the “Spanish style” seemed perfect for Shanghai.

The brochure *The Spanish House for China* (1934), by Shanghainese architect Robert Fan (Fan Wenzhao) and his Danish colleague Carl Lindblom, proposed 24 residential designs in this style. Lindblom argued that Shanghai’s Spanish style was not derived from resort homes in Palm Beach, Miami, Hollywood and San Clemente, but had its origin in medieval Spain. The text claimed that “the fundamental characteristics of the architecture of all the Western Mediterranean countries are substantially the same and have their origin in China”<sup>44</sup>.

Mansions, terraced compounds and apartment buildings in Shanghai were incorporating multiple Spanish elements, such as rough textured stucco walls, arched windows, balustraded balconies over main entries, decorative columns, terracotta ventilation grills, wavy cornices and clay barrel tile on the roofs. American, British, Hungarian, Russian and French architects were churning out these homes in the French Concession and beyond the boundaries of the International Settlement. The upscale development Columbia Circle, built between 1928 and 1932, offered buyers five “Spanish” types to choose from: San Clemente, California, Florida, San Diego and Hollywood<sup>45</sup>. The United States – not medieval Spain – was a model for the fast-growing city of Shanghai.

The stylistic diversity that distinguished the projects of Calatroni, Hsieh and Co. was characteristic of Shanghai architects working for Chinese clients. Their designs adapted western architectural traditions to local customs and materials while implementing technological innovations like steel framework and reinforced concrete. A Shanghai architect’s portfolio could include Victorian Gothic manors, neoclassical public buildings, streamlined modern apartment houses, suburban villas in the shape of Chinese traditional pavilions and multi-unit terraced compounds with Baroque Revival flourishes.

Terraced compounds, also known as lane houses (*lilong*, or *longtang*), was a hybrid urban form unique to Shanghai. Since their first emergence in the 1860s in response to a population crisis, they evolved and modernized. Rows of connected brick buildings with courtyards behind black wooden doors (*shikumen*) eventually gave way to three- and four-story multi-family townhouses, with or without courtyards, oriented toward south and arranged on a grid. Branded as “semi-foreign”, these hybrids were often a subject of criticism: “semi-foreign has come to mean shoddy, gaudy, cheap or insipid”<sup>46</sup>.

Lane houses were extremely profitable for developers, allowing them to put up to 120 units on a single acre. This helped Shanghai reach a population density of 600 people per acre and become one of the most crowded metropolitan areas in the world<sup>47</sup>. “Jerry-built”<sup>48</sup> lane houses constituted the majority of new buildings in Shanghai during the boom years of 1926–1934, and Calatroni, Hsieh and Co. designed a number of them.

<sup>43</sup> J. V. W. Bergamini, “Architectural Meditations”, *Chinese Recorder*, October 1, 1924, 653.

<sup>44</sup> Carl Lindblom and Robert Fan, *The Spanish House for China* (n.p., 1934), s/n.

<sup>45</sup> *Columbia Circle* (Arco, c. 1930).

<sup>46</sup> Rodney Gilbert, “Semi-Foreign”, *North-China Herald*, November 18, 1922, 471.

<sup>47</sup> Denison and Ren, *Building Shanghai*, 159-160.

<sup>48</sup> “Building regulations”, *China Press*, January 28, 1930, 19.



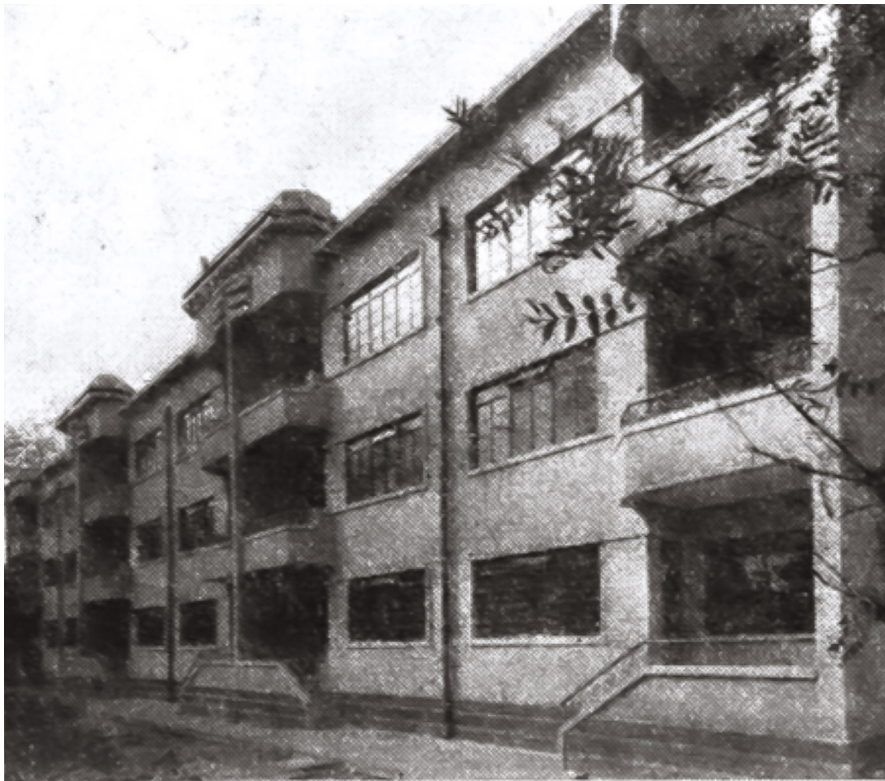
7.11

The lane compound Sun Avenue, built contemporaneously with Sun Court and Santa Apartments, was commissioned by the same property developer, Sun Chunsheng; it went on the market in December 1929. The complex, located on Bubbling Well Road, was comprised of 96 three-story houses, each with five rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. The buildings had hot and cold water and modern sanitation. Intended as rentals for Chinese urbanites, they were undistinguished stylistically and lacked decor aside from contrasting two-tone paint. Sun Chunsheng's Central Realty Co. managed and promoted these rentals, banking on their convenient location and moderate fees<sup>49</sup>.

7.11

Sun Avenue compound seen from the air. 2025. Courtesy of Bu Jing.

<sup>49</sup> "New Terrace Dwellings at Sun Avenue", *China Press*, December 11, 1929, 21.



## BURLINGTON COURT

at Tsongchow Road.

*Architects:* MESSRS. CALATRONI, HSIEH & Co.

*Heating & Plumbing Contractors:* EASTERN CHINA  
ENGINEERING COMPANY.

As the 1930s progressed, Calatroni, Hsieh and Co. increasingly relied on invited architects for the design of buildings. The Russian émigré Igor Adamovitch, educated in China's Harbin, was head of the architectural department for several years<sup>50</sup>. Another contributor was the architect Vladimir Fedoroff (1880–after 1941), who had had a long career in his native Vladivostok, where he built over 200 structures before emigrating to China in the 1920s. Calatroni, Hsieh and Co.'s five-story apartment building Burlington Court, built in 1935 in an alley off Bubbling Well Road, had a strong visual resemblance to Fedoroff's other designs. Multiple horizontal lines intersected the facade, from alternating bands of cream stucco and red brick to banded windows and long extruding balconies. Tubular railings and round portholes added to the cache of nautical references, characteristic of late Art Deco.

7.12

### The 1940s: The end of the practice

The list of the projects by Calatroni, Hsieh and Co. is far from complete. The company stayed in operation as late as 1947, but little is known about its output during that time. After the Japanese invasion of North China, the Chinese government put quotas on the use of stone, wood and metal, reserving them for the defense industry. By 1936, construction materials in Shanghai were in short supply and financing of new projects stopped<sup>51</sup>.

In autumn 1937, the Japanese Imperial Army attacked Shanghai and took control over its Chinese territory; later the occupation spread over the concessions as well. Foreign architectural firms

<sup>50</sup> Vladimir Zhiganov, *Russkie v Shankhae. Russians in Shanghai* (Slovo, 1936), 207.

<sup>51</sup> Eric B. Cumine, "1937 Architectural Prospects", *North-China Herald*, February 3, 1937, 201.

closed Shanghai offices and moved their headquarters to Hong Kong; many local firms disbanded and their employees looked for new positions. Calatroni, Hsieh and Co. stayed afloat, but in 1937 its founding partner Ernyi Hsieh joined the Chinese Electric Power Co. as Consulting Engineer<sup>52</sup>.

The end of the Pacific War in 1945 brought a brief resurgence of commercial activity in Shanghai, but the intensifying civil war and the advance of the Communists curbed this revival. In May 1949, the Communists took control of Shanghai, and several months later the People's Republic of China was established, led by Mao Zedong.

In the years that followed, all entrepreneurs and professionals had to put their skills at the service of the regime. Ernyi Hsieh, now known as Xue Shengzu, became an engineer for the China Construction Northwest Design Research Institute until 1954, and later was Chief Engineer at the China Academy of Building Research<sup>53</sup>. In 1958–1959, he was engaged as an expert for the construction of the Great Hall of the People, in Beijing. Xue Shengzu died in 1967, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. During this violent mass movement, educated professionals were attacked, humiliated, imprisoned and driven to suicide by rioting Red Guards.

"In Mao's view, the traitors of the Revolution are too many", wrote Edison Calatroni in his poetry book *127 epigrammi*, published in 1968 by Gastaldi publishers<sup>54</sup>. After many years abroad, he moved back to Italy, but continued to travel around the world, infusing his writing with sarcastic commentary on global politics. He died in Parma in 1981.

## Conclusion

Edison Calatroni and Ernyi Hsieh (Xue Shengzu) left a unique legacy in Shanghai. Not only did they create the longest-running Sino-Italian architectural enterprise in the city, but also erected a number of original buildings that now constitute an integral part of Shanghai's architectural identity. Further research of the provenance of buildings associated with the firm will help expand their list of works, and an effort to compile a comprehensive history of the partnership and its legacy will be instrumental in ensuring their proper preservation.

The mechanisms of heritage protection in Shanghai are controversial and opaque, and regulations are subject to liberal interpretation. Some of Calatroni and Hsieh's buildings, like the Sun Court and S. T. Sze's residence, are included in the list of Excellent Historic Buildings, preventing their modification and safeguarding their original appearance. Others, like Sun Avenue and Jubilee Court Apartments, are designated Immoveable Cultural Relics, which indicates a lower degree of protection. Still others, like Burlington Court, enjoy no special recognition and could be demolished at the will of a property developer. Rapid redevelopment in the recent decades has already seen much of the historic urban landscape decimated. While many of Calatroni and Hsieh's works are intact, they continue to evoke nostalgia for the cosmopolitan metropolis of the 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>52</sup> *Zhongguo Gongcheng Renmin Lu [Who's Who of Chinese Engineers]* (Shanghai Commercial Press, 1941), 283.

<sup>53</sup> Qinghua Tan, "Tsinghua School Graduates Research (Part 1): 1912-1919".

<sup>54</sup> Edison Calatroni, *127 epigrammi* (Gastaldi, 1968) 50.