

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# From a grand hotel to an urban symbol: the Astor Hotel in old and new Tianjin

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## Abstract

This article examines the enduring iconicity, multifaceted functions, and changing meanings of the Astor Hotel in Tianjin—one of the first international hotels in modern China—from the mid-19th century to the 21st century. Originally built more than 150 years ago, the Astor Hotel still stands exactly where it did in the former British Concession in Tianjin. This hotel was not only a venue boasting Tianjin's most expensive accommodations but also a crucial site where politics, technology, economics, social, and cultural changes intersected and developed in its treaty port incarnation. Moreover, the expansion of the Astor Hotel evolved along with the development of Tianjin from a hyper-colonial city to a Chinese-run metropolis. Shortly after the Communist Revolution in China, its ownership was overtaken by the Tianjin Municipal Government. Following a sequence of major renovations and commercial relaunches in the 1990s, the Astor Hotel was restored and reconstructed as an emblem of Tianjin's historical status as an international and cosmopolitan city in China. Both continuity and changes will be emphasised in the discussion of the Astor Hotel's history, as well as its multiple functions and shifting symbolic significance.

**Keywords** Tianjin, The Astor Hotel, Heritage, Urban symbol, Cities, Colonialism, Historical monuments

## 1 Introduction

*To pass away from the British Concession without mentioning this well known first class hotel would not be justice to our readers. That Tientsin can support such an up to date hotel is also further proof of the stability of the town and a testimony to its right to claim at least the second position of importance in China. The Astor House Hotel contains every convenience, such as area looked for in the highest class hotels of America and the European Continent.*

---*Guide to Tientsin 1907, 8*

*Listed as one of the seven hotels that literally changed China, the Astor Hotel of Tianjin has been*

*the city's premiere luxury accommodation choice for more than 150 years... After more than 150 years of urban myths and romanticization, the hotel is widely hailed as a signature landmark of Tianjin's past and present status as a longstanding cosmopolitan city of China.*

---'A Brief History of Tianjin's Most Historic Hotel, the Astor', *Culture Trip*, March 3, 2022 (Santangelo 2022)<sup>1</sup>

The above epigraphs neatly capture the enduring popularity, domestic and international prestige, and symbolic significance of the Astor Hotel in Tianjin, which was one of the first Western-style grand hotels in modern China.

<sup>1</sup> <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/china/articles/a-brief-history-of-tianjins-most-historic-hotel-the-astor>. Accessed 8 November 2023.

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**Fig. 1** Astor House Hotel in the 1930s (Source: University of Bristol - Historical Photographs of China reference number: Gr01-071)

Although written in different periods and languages, both of these excerpts recognise the hotel as a first-class accommodation choice while emphasising the intimate interrelationship between the hotel's past and the history of Tianjin. The Astor Hotel is located on the North Jiefang Road in the Heping District (which was known as the Victoria Road of the former British Concession during the city's colonial era), with its eastern entrance facing Tianjin's most important water system—the Hai River. The hotel has undergone multiple major renovations and expansions over the past 150 years, but it still stands exactly where it was originally built in 1863 (Fig. 1).

Today, the Astor Hotel comfortably coexists with its immediate surroundings. Outside its gates is a sequence of European-style buildings along both sides of the Hai River, Tianjin's most important waterway, which has played a crucial political-economic role in its urban transformation and in the lives of city dwellers across different historical periods.<sup>2</sup> The nearby pier, which is owned by the hotel, is used as a jump-off point for river cruises. When the hotel was reopened after a grand renovation in 2010, it was widely covered in local and national media with great fanfare (*Tianjin Ribao* 2010; *Huanqiu Shibao* 2010). However, few urban dwellers in the city seemed to remember the hotel's origin in the Western colonial encroachment in Tianjin when the city

was forced to open as a treaty port in the 1860s. Similarly, Tianjin's municipal government and urban planners have celebrated the hotel as a valuable architectural and cultural heritage rather than an epitome of foreign imperialist penetration. At the heart of this article is the transmogrification of the Astor Hotel from a product of Tianjin's colonialism to a symbol of its globalising ambition. Under what historical circumstances did the Astor Hotel come into being, what role did it play in Tianjin's urban society during the colonial era, and what economic, political, and cultural forces have given rise to its contemporary status as a locally, nationally, and internationally famed emblem of Tianjin's globalising identity? Given its ties to Western imperialism, why is the Astor still considered an important cornerstone of Tianjin's architectural and urban heritage in post-Mao China? How has the Astor Hotel, the first joint-venture enterprise in reform-era Tianjin, figured into nostalgia for the colonial period in a time of globalisation? To address these questions, this article seeks to contribute to the academic literature on urban heritage and historic preservation in reform-era China through a case study of a prominent colonial heritage in Tianjin.

The urban context in which the Astor Hotel is situated is the city of Tianjin, a major port in northern China. Unlike other urban centres such as Beijing and Shanghai, which are better known for their economic prowess or political influence, Tianjin has often been described as a site of the 'exhibition of world architecture' because numerous foreign-style architectures remain in the city. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the city's past

<sup>2</sup> In another contribution to this Special Issue, Maurizio Marinelli reveals the role played by the heritagisation of the Hai River in the city government's effort to promote Tianjin's 'favorable imagery of the river-city for political management'.

lies in its distinctive colonial history: from the 1860s to 1940s, Tianjin was home to up to nine foreign concessions alongside a sequence of changing Chinese municipalities, making it an unparalleled microcosm of global imperialist politics.<sup>3</sup> Although Tianjin does not occupy a central position in the study of Chinese urban history as its southern counterpart Shanghai does,<sup>4</sup> a growing number of studies in English-language scholarship have examined this city. The monographs devoted to Tianjin can be largely divided into three categories: state-society relationships, as manifested in Tianjin (Hershatter 1986; Kwan 2001; Sheehan 2003); urban modernity in Tianjin's colonial context (Rogaski 2004; LaCouture 2021); and the early years of the Chinese Communist Party's activity in the city (Lieberthal 1980; Yick 1995; Brown 2012). Furthermore, some studies have focused specifically on individual concessions in Tianjin, with the Italian Concession receiving the most attention.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, questions related to the ideas and practices of urban heritage in contemporary Tianjin have also become a relatively popular object of inquiry in the Anglophone academy.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the steady growth of scholarly interest in Tianjin, one of its most recognisable architectures—the Astor Hotel—has only been mentioned in passing in some of the English-language accounts of the city (Arnold 2012, 150; Nield 2015, 243). Within Western-language scholarship, the only study that discusses the Astor Hotel at some length is a French-language article by Thierry Sanjuan entitled 'Le grand hôtel: Le temps des 'ouvertures' chinoises', which compares the Astor to other grand hotels in the same periods. By using the Astor as 'an exemplary case of the first grand hotel created in China', Sanjuan shows that grand hotels in China represent 'one of the main urban tools for opening China to the outside world' (Sanjuan 2003, 77). While this article extends some aspects of Sanjuan's study, including its analysis of the multifunctional nature of the hotel, as well as the Astor's longstanding prestige as both a world class grand hotel and a site of conspicuous consumption, it is primarily interested in how the Astor has been reconstructed as a cultural and historical heritage and has come to represent the city's globalising identity during the post-Mao era. Specifically, this article examines the Astor Hotel

across a wide span of time by drawing on newspapers, travel guides, personal writings, government papers, and other published primary and secondary documents. Both continuity and changes in terms of the hotel's functions, symbolic meanings, and shifting iconicity across different historical periods are emphasised.

This article examines how the Astor Hotel has been reconfigured as a crucial historical, cultural, and architectural heritage during the post-Mao era. The Astor's intimate connection with Tianjin's colonial past presents a complex issue for the city government, its powerholders, and urban planners, especially given the Chinese Communist Party's ideological outcry against anti-imperialism. However, instead of allowing the Astor's old buildings to fall into disrepair, the city's leaders, along with the hotel's owners, have embraced and reframed the hotel's complex past as a way to gain economic benefits and boost Tianjin's modern identity as a globalising city. By focusing on state-supported renovation, the construction of a museum, and the promulgation of cultural production, this article argues that those responsible for the hotel's renewal and rebranding have played a dual game of highlighting its historical prestige and contemporary status as a historic landmark while downplaying its colonial origins. Then, this article reveals that the heritagization, a term denoting the process whereby historical artefacts and buildings are transformed into an object in display or exhibition with an effect on the present time (Harvey 2008; Harrison 2015), of the Astor has involved the selective recycling of its historical elements to generate a new transnational space as both a world class hotel and a site of cultural heritage.

The recent development of the Astor has been consistent with nationwide trends in urban historic preservation. With the rise of urban tourism and consumption since the 1990s, narratives and practices related to heritage preservation have been intimately linked with the development imperative. Historical and cultural heritage has been instrumentalised by local state authorities and urban planners to brand their cities, promote business opportunities, and encourage tourism (He and Wu 2005; Wang 2009; Shin 2010). In addition to economic value, existing scholarship on colonial heritage and nostalgia in urban China (especially Shanghai) reveals how contemporary urban administration has drawn on discourses of the Republican-era Shanghai to construct the city's current image as having vibrant economic and cosmopolitan roots that have continued until today (Zhang 2000; Wu 2004; Pan 2016; Law and Veldpaus 2017). Exploring a new site for consideration, this article shows that the heritagization of the hotel over the last three decades has dovetailed with the city's economic imperatives while contributing to the narrative of the city's past as an internationally oriented and cosmopolitan site. Specifically, the hotel's commercial

<sup>3</sup> "Concessions" were essentially leased foreign enclaves. Although nominally the sovereignty over these enclaves belonged to the Chinese, these concessions were not subject to Chinese jurisdiction. It is reasonable to conceive of these concessions as "microcolony", where foreign residents enjoyed special prerogatives.

<sup>4</sup> To obtain a sense of the scope of the "Shanghai studies," see Fogel 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Maurizio Marinelli is the most prolific scholar on this topic. For a representative work of his on the Tianjin Italian Concession, see Marinelli 2009.

<sup>6</sup> See special issue, "The Architectural Heritage of Tianjin", in *The China Heritage Quarterly*, no. 21, March 2010, <http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/editorial.php?issue=021>. Accessed 22 September 2022.

*raison d'être* justifies the use of history for its marketing value, although this entails the adaptive and selective use of the hotel's past. The reinvention of the hotel as a historical monument since the 2000s has helped to increase its marketability and promote the city's rich and diverse cultural identity and longstanding international history.

This article has four parts. Focusing on the Astor Hotel during Tianjin's colonial era, the first part reveals the multiple functions that it served in Tianjin's urban society during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This part shows that the Astor Hotel did not simply provide accommodation services and that it was, in fact, a crucial site where politics, technology, economics, social, and cultural changes intersected and developed. The second part examines the transformation of the Astor Hotel from a grand hotel to a reinvented urban heritage site in the city during the post-Mao period. This part reveals the specific ways in which the municipal authorities, as well as the owners of the hotel, have constructed a series of connections between the hotel and its shifting sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Preceding the discussion and conclusion, the penultimate part of this article returns to the question of continuity and changes by explaining how the functions, clientele, and symbolic meanings of the Astor Hotel have either remained the same or changed in noticeable ways over time. Notably, the main body of this study focuses on the hotel during the colonial and postreform eras, chiefly because some of the most crucial developments of the hotel occurred in these two periods.<sup>7</sup>

## 2 The multiple facets of the Astor Hotel in colonial Tianjin

Shortly after Tianjin was opened as a treaty port, Britain, France, and America claimed their own concessions on the western bank of the Hai River. Although they were surrounded by a largely Chinese urban society, these concessions were nevertheless critical sites where foreign residents reproduced their political system and patterns of social lives in an unfamiliar territory. The influx of transnational travellers into Tianjin generated the need for accommodation. In such a context, the Astor soon became one of the most essential infrastructures in the city. As Tianjin gradually became a more open and cosmopolitan port, the functions of the Astor Hotel extended beyond its original role as a place of accommodation and gained political and social importance.

Shortly after the establishment of the British Concession, the Astor Hotel was built. In the spring of 1863, a British Methodist missionary named John Innocent funded the construction of a small building at the



**Fig. 2** The Astor Hotel entrance hall (Source: Guide to Tientsin 1907)

southern end of the land he subleased in Tianjin from the British government. Located in the southern part of the newly founded concession, this small hostelry was sandwiched between the Hai River to the east and the Victoria Road to the west. Originally serving multiple purposes, including those of a warehouse, a trading firm, and a hotel, this 'mud-house' was the prototype of the Astor Hotel (Candlin 1909). The profits that Innocent made from renting the hotel to the British residents in the city during the following decade were later used to finance his religious activities, including the construction of schools and churches. Different interpretations of the origin of the hotel's Chinese name *Lishunde* (利顺德) have been proposed. While some hold that such an appellation was an approximate transliteration of its founder's Chinese name (殷森德, *Yin Sende*), others claim that it originated from an ancient aphorism—*li shun yi de* (利顺以德), meaning that one must act morally to ensure that there are fewer difficulties in one's practice—of one of the Confucian classics: *Mencius* (Liu and Tian 1991, 20–21) (Fig. 2).

Notably, the Astor hotel has a prime location. The hotel's eastern side faces the banks of the Hai River, which, in a port city such as Tianjin, allows it to be visible from the harbour. After its first major renovation in the 1880s, the hotel became a major architectural symbol and was easily visible to approaching ships. The Astor was also built on one of the main avenues—the Victoria Road—in the British Concession. Its proximity to other prominent sites also enhanced its reputation and prestige. A couple of doors to the north of the Astor stood the 'Tientsin Club', the centre of entertainment and leisure for Euro-American expatriates in the city. On the western side of the Astor was an open space known as Victoria Park (Zhang 2018b) and the magnificent British Consulate (the Gordon Hall) named after

<sup>7</sup> As it will become clearer in the following passages, the four major renovations that the Astor has undergone fall within these two timeframes, as they occurred in 1886, 1924, 1984, and 2009.



The second main renovation project took place in the 1920s. As the size of the British Concession continued to grow, it became increasingly necessary for the premises of the Astor Hotel to be expanded further. By this point, the western extended area of the British Concession (today's Five Avenues) had been laid out with more than 2,000 foreign style houses built there (Nield 2015, 245). In 1924, in response to the growing number of customers at the hotel, the board of directors decided to construct another four-story building to the north of the old one, which effectively added 2,500 square metres to its existing covered area. At the same time, the size of the dance hall and restaurant was also enlarged considerably (Sanjuan 2003, 79).

The Astor Hotel also undertook diplomatic functions by serving as a consulate for different nations and as a primary location for diplomatic meetings. Tianjin's proximity to Beijing gave rise to the former's significance as a diplomatic centre during the second half of the 19th century. The city appeared as a separate city from China's capital, where Sino-foreign negotiations could take place without any symbolic challenges to the imperial authorities. Li Hongzhang, the most influential Chinese minister who was singlehandedly responsible for nearly all the nation's diplomatic relations, played an indispensable role in making Tianjin a key point of contact where many diplomatic negotiations were conducted. From 1870 to the eve of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894), more than half of the international treaties that were implemented (12 out of 23) were signed in the city's foreign concessions (Singaravélou 2017, 22). Many diplomatic meetings took place at the Astor, with multiple treaties signed there as well, including the Sino-Brazilian treaty in 1881, the Sino-French treaty in 1884, and the Sino-Portuguese treaty in 1887 (Wang 1957, 197, 208 and 522). The British and Americans, as well as the Japanese and Canadians subsequently, all set up consular offices within the hotel premises soon after it opened.

The legal principle of extraterritoriality in foreign concessions meant that these colonial enclaves in Tianjin were not subjected to Chinese law. Located in the British Concession, the Astor adopted the function of a privileged and protected space for the European population in the time of crisis. This was particularly true during the Boxer Uprising. Although some rooms of the Astor were destroyed during local battles, the hotel nevertheless provided refuge for the European residents in the city. The hotel's role as a political haven became more apparent in the wake of the 1911 Republican Revolution. Between the 1910s and late 1930s, Tianjin became an ideal destination for a distinctive social group known as 'yugong' (roughly translated into displaced social elites). This newly

emerged social class mainly consisted of two categories: 1) Manchu noblemen from former royal families and lineages and 2) military officials, politicians, and cultural elites who lost their power and positions amid political and social chaos during the warlord era (1916–1927) (Hu 2014). Some of the most distinctive personalities in modern Chinese history left their marks on the Astor when they spent extended time in Tianjin. For example, Puyi, the last emperor of the Qing Dynasty, took up residence in Tianjin in 1925 and frequented the Astor during his stay in the city. Upon his visit to Tianjin, Sun Yat-sen, the founding father of the Republic of China, also stayed at the Astor Hotel.<sup>8</sup>

Since foreign concessions, particularly the British Concession, were at the forefront of introducing Western technology and industrial and managerial expertise, the Astor Hotel offered a representative case of technological transference. Specifically, the hotel's owners were able to utilise technical innovations from Europe and North America, so the Astor was the first hotel in China to provide its guests with telephone and gas lighting. In 1888, it was equipped with an electric generator to power lamps and fans. In 1899, the Astor Hotel was supplied with city water only 2 years after the Tianjin Water Company was founded in the city. In 1905, the Astor became the first Chinese hotel to be equipped with a heating system, and a hot-water boiler was installed 5 years later (Sanjuan 2003, 82).

In addition to being a laboratory of modern technology, the Astor Hotel was also a crucial site of conspicuous consumption and commercial leisure. By the beginning of the 20th century, the Astor Hotel had been equipped with a variety of amenities and services on par with those of the hotels in the West. According to a city guide published in 1907, the hotel had the capacity to accommodate more than 300 guests, with 'handsome' dining rooms where Western style cuisine and wines were served (Guide to Tientsin 1907, 8). In fact, the hotel even had its own cold storage appliances and its own farm (Wright 1908, 734). As the city of Tianjin gradually evolved into a cosmopolitan urban centre,<sup>9</sup> the Astor became a venue for cultural innovation. From the 1920s to the 1930s, a string of world-renowned singers and musicians performed at the Astor. During these two decades, the contemporary newspapers in Tianjin, including *Dagong Bao* (L'Impartial) and *Yishi Bao* (Social Welfare), included

<sup>8</sup> A Brief Report of Sun Yat-sen's Arrival in Tianjin, *Shen Bao*, August 28, 1912.

<sup>9</sup> An important index was the increase of foreign population at the turn of the 20th century. By 1906, the foreign population of Tianjin had reached over 6,000. See Zhang and Liu 2013, 88.

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**Fig. 5** An English-language advertisement for the Astor (Source: Guide to Tientsin 1907)

reports of these performances at the Astor. As another example of the Astor’s prominent role as a centre of cross-cultural communication, in January 1929, a fashion contest was held at Astor, where local upper class socialites from different ethnic backgrounds (including Chinese) participated to showcase some of the trendiest clothing of their home countries. *Dagong Bao*, Tianjin’s best-selling news outlet, carried lengthy reports of this event (Fig. 5).<sup>10</sup>

With its modern technology, comfort, and consumer habits that met Western standards, the Astor acquired a reputation as a place of privileges and became a main site for socialising during the 1920s. As an advertisement published in the *Dagong Bao* showed, ‘(the Astor) hosted numerous dancing events during the previous month,

and Chinese elite members from both the officialdom and the business world often frequent our establishment.’<sup>11</sup> From 1918 to 1929, the Astor hosted an average of five international banquets per year that were attended by eminent Chinese and foreign dignitaries.<sup>12</sup> Not only was the Astor a prime destination for political figures visiting Tianjin, cultural elites also tended to choose this grand hotel in Tianjin over other hospitality options. For example, Mei Lanfang, who was arguably the most famous Peking Opera artist in modern history, always stayed at the Astor whenever he came to Tianjin to perform.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> A Report of Shimmering Light and Dazzling Dances at the Astor Hotel Last Night, *Dagong Bao*, January 19, 1929.

<sup>11</sup> ‘An Advertisement for the Tianjin Astor Hotel’, *Dagong Bao*, March 15, 1917.

<sup>12</sup> These statistics were mainly obtained from both the *Dagong Bao* and *Yishi Bao*.

<sup>13</sup> For such a report, see, for example, *Beiyang Huabao* (Beiyang Pictorials), February 8, 1928.

However, the fate of the Astor changed dramatically when the Sino-Japanese War broke out in July 1937. Although initially the foreign quarters of the city continued to operate, the Japanese military authorities launched systematic harassment of the foreign residents starting in 1939. Its aggression culminated in what was known as the ‘Tianjin Incident’, in which the Japanese army imposed a blockade on the British and French Concessions. This incident escalated into a major international crisis among Japan, Britain, and China, and the blockade was not lifted until a year later (Swann 1998). Shortly after the Pacific War began in 1941, Japan took control of all the foreign concessions in Tianjin. Two years later, the Japanese took over the Astor Hotel and changed its name to ‘Asiatic Hotel’ (亚细亚饭店, *Yaxiya Fandian*). The change in name was inspired by the Pan-Asianism ideology that the Japanese empire propagated during WWII. The Japanese ownership did not last very long, however, as the hotel was once again returned to William O’hara, the former chairperson of the hotel’s board of directors prior to the Japanese occupation, after the Japanese surrender in November 1945, with its name restored back to the Astor (*Lishunde*).<sup>14</sup>

### 3 Renewed perceptions and re-development of the Astor Hotel during the reform era, 1980s–2010s

The takeover of Tianjin in 1949 by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was soon followed by the ruling party’s efforts to nationalise the city’s foreign firms. Three years after the CCP took control of the city, the ownership of the Astor Hotel was officially transferred to the Tianjin Municipal Government, with its name changed to ‘the Grand Hotel of Tianjin’ (*Tianjin Dafandian*). Subsequently, the hotel was transformed from a foreign-owned, private business to one run by the city government. From the early 1950s to the late 1970s, the hotel served the functions of receiving foreign dignitaries and heads of state, as well as senior members of the Chinese Central Committee (Liu and Tian 1991, 109–115). Just as in the second half of the 19th century, the Astor continued to feature as a crucial site where diplomatic meetings took place during the Mao era. For example, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai held a meeting with his Polish counterpart, Józef Cyrankiewicz, at the Astor Hotel in 1957 as part of the latter’s visit to China (Liu and Tian 1993, 151–152).

The Reform and Opening Up, which started in the 1980s and was launched by Deng Xiaoping, brought

about far-reaching economic, political, and social changes for China. In the local context of Tianjin, the 1980s witnessed the city mayor (Li Ruihuan)’s reform program in infrastructure development, which included its transportation system, water and gas distribution, and residential construction (Hendrischke 1999, 189–190). As economic development became increasingly decentralised during the 1990s, provincial and municipal governments began to undertake more responsibilities for their own cities’ development (Lu et al. 2019, 61). During this period, Tianjin’s overall economic performance improved drastically, which was primarily due to increased foreign investment (Hendrischke 1999, 199). At the same time, tourism increasingly became integrated into local economic planning, as the central government identified it as a crucial factor in China’s transition to the market economy. According to the 8th Five-Year Plan (1991–1995), tourism was promoted by the state ‘as a strategic sector of economic modernisation and as an experimental field to attract foreign investment’ (Chauffert-Yvart et al. 2020, 4). This position was further consolidated in 1998, when the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued a decree that emphasised the role of tourism in the development of the local economy. Like other local governments, the municipal authorities in Tianjin made the tourism industry a central project of its local development.

Correspondingly, the early decades of the reform period also ushered in a new age of development for the Astor Hotel. In an effort to bring in more foreign expertise and investment that had been suspended during the Mao era, the General Tourist Company of Tianjin signed an agreement with the Zapata Trading Company of Hong Kong in 1984; thus, the Astor became the first hotel in the city’s hospitality industry to have a joint-venture investment. This agreement called for the hotel to be rebuilt into a multifunctional enterprise with advanced equipment and modern service and management. On the one hand, the two old buildings that were originally built in the 1880s and 1920s were renovated to maintain a style of classical British architecture. On the other hand, a new building to the east of the old buildings was constructed. The goal was not to restore the hotel to its Republican-era original state but rather to create a largely pseudoauthentic and historic effect. At the same time, the original name of the hotel—‘the Astor’—was adopted (*lishunde* in Chinese). When the renovation was completed in July 1987, the leaders of the Tianjin Municipal Government attended the ceremony at the hotel where the new seven-storey and newly added luxurious wing were announced to be opened (Liu and Tian 1991, 116–117). In the early 1990s, the Astor’s management continued its efforts to

<sup>14</sup> See *Tianjin Yaxiya fandian yijiaoshu* (The Transfer Documents for the Asiatic Hotel), by Huabei Jiaotong Gufen Youxian Gongsi, a copy held at the Astor Hotel Museum.



renew the hotel. In 1996, the State Council declared the Astor Hotel a Major National Historical and Cultural Site, the highest protection level approved by the Chinese central government.<sup>15</sup>

The early 2000s marked a new phase of transformation for the city of Tianjin. The newly appointed mayor, Dai Xianglong, implemented an ambitious plan for Tianjin's development by forging it as one of the leading international ports in China. Among his key initiatives was the further development of tourism, and his pragmatism was manifested in his vision for Tianjin's potential as a tourist destination. Specifically, Dai saw Tianjin's colonial legacy as a source of tourism revenues and economic capital. The 600th anniversary of the founding of the city, which was celebrated in 2004, also provided the local authorities with an opportunity to generate a new narrative for the city of Tianjin as a place of convergence between Chinese and Western elements. In 2005, with the creation of the Tianjin Historic Architecture Restoration and Development Co., Ltd., by the city government, heritage promotion accelerated (Lu et al. 2019, 59 and 62).

Since the beginning of the new millennium, Tianjin municipal authorities and urban planners have made concerted efforts to reorder and refashion the city's former foreign concessions to promote its globalising identity. As Noah Nasser has suggested, in a globalising age, 'traditional historic places are undergoing a redefinition and reinterpretation of their cultural heritage in order to be competitive and attractive' (Nasser 2003, 467). Certainly, Chinese cities in the post-Mao era have been locked in fierce competition based on economic criteria (Ni 2010). However, another source of the city's competitiveness derives from its international prestige and reputation, or to use Maurizio Marinelli's term, 'a reiterated narrative of global modernity' (Marinelli 2018, 211). Tianjin's treaty-port history, together with the presence of nine foreign concessions during this period, has been refigured by local powerholders to claim the city's primacy, even in comparison with other Chinese cities that had once been open to foreign trade and subject to colonial influences. Although previously a symbol of foreign imperialist encroachment, the former concessionary spaces, along with their architectural buildings, have offered the local government an ideal opportunity to develop tourism, expand commercial ventures, and promote Tianjin's status as an internationally oriented city. Not only are there considerable economic benefits associated with heritage commodification and tourism promotion for the Tianjin municipality, but the presence of these heritage sites also holds great potential for generating new imaginations

and practices of urban renewal that sets itself apart from cities such as Beijing or Shanghai.

Against the backdrop of a renewed appreciation of Tianjin's architectural heritage, the owners of the Astor Hotel launched the largest redevelopment project in its history in the 2000s. This renewal of the Astor was a crucial project for commercial tourism that the municipal government had begun to promote in the first decade of the 2000s. As Tianjin's powerholders and urban planners spared no efforts in promulgating the slogan of 'Tianjin seen through a hundred years of China' (*bainian Zhongguo kan Tianjin*); the Astor Hotel naturally came to be considered a physical embodiment of the city's longstanding history of global engagements.<sup>16</sup> This newly promoted image of the Astor dovetailed with the official branding of Tianjin as a cosmopolitan and internationally oriented city. The redevelopment work began in early 2009 and lasted until August 2010. Not only did the Tianjin Municipal Government pay close attention to the Astor's renewal, state-run apparatuses such as the National Cultural Heritage Administration, Bureau of Land Resources and Housing Management, and China National Tourism Administration all supported this project by issuing documents of endorsement. The General Tourist Company of Tianjin and the board of directors of the Astor Hotel jointly invested nearly 300 million yuan in the redevelopment project, with the goal of improving accommodation services and preserving the hotel's historical value.

Two aspects of the hotel's transformation and commercial relaunch during the last three decades merit closer analysis. The first aspect lies in the material realm, namely, the modification and enhancements of the Astor as an attempt to reflect its long history and recreate its historical décor through the use of various memorabilia. From the late 1990s to the 2010s, not only was the Astor expanded considerably in terms of its size and the number of luxury rooms, but its buildings and interior design were also refashioned to convey a sense of historical authenticity. This involved the reparation of the outer eaves and the redecoration of the interior of the hotel to reconstruct the architectural style of the 19th century. With the addition of wooden verandas, arched windows, and brick façades based on historic photographs, the alteration of the hotel's exterior structure strongly resembled the Victorian style in London. Furthermore, the lobby, restaurant, bar, and luxury suites within the Astor were redecorated to reflect the atmosphere of the colonial era. These architectural enhancements were designed to evoke a type of historical authenticity, inviting guests to

<sup>15</sup> See the announcement by State Council, November 20, 1996, [https://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2014-07/21/content\\_2721166.htm](https://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2014-07/21/content_2721166.htm). Accessed 22 September 2022.

<sup>16</sup> This slogan first appeared in the Tianjin Municipal Museum, <https://www.tjbgw.com/cn/exhibitionInfo.aspx?id=2327>. Accessed 11 October 2022.

relive the hotel's exoticism and allowing them to retreat to a bygone era.

At the same time, the hotel management displayed memories of some of the most renowned patrons at the Astor—such as Sun Yat-sen, Pu Yi, Mei Lanfang, Dalai Lama, and Herbert Hoover (the list goes on)—through paintings, photos, a large carved panel of the notable individuals associated with the hotel, and numerous antiques. The rooms in which these eminent figures had once stayed were partially restored to their original state while being supplied with modern amenities and service. Perhaps the most telling example is a deluxe presidential suite known as ‘*Cuiheng bei yu*’ (翠亨北寓, Northern Residence of Cui Heng). The name of the suite originated from the village of Cui Heng, Sun Yat-sen's birthplace, and it has been suggested that the founding father of the Republic of China once resided in this room during his visits north to Tianjin in 1912 and 1924. These prominent former patrons, all of whom occupy an important place in the collective memories of people in China and beyond, serve as symbols of history in the same way as the aforementioned physical modification. The fact that the Astor Hotel was once patronised by these renowned historical figures helps enhance its historical authenticity while validating its heritage status.

No other example can better illustrate the attempt to construct the Astor Hotel as a historic monument than the museum built within the hotel. As the first museum in China that is located inside a hotel, the Astor Hotel Museum (*Lishunde bowuguan*) was built in 2010. With its entrance beside the elevator built in 1924, the museum covers an area of more than 700 square metres and houses more than 3,000 valuable historical objects accompanied by an assortment of historical photographs. Conventional practices of selection, labelling, and organisation have been adopted for arranging displays within the museum to construct a historical narrative about the hotel's past and thereby give the exhibits an authoritative voice to speak for its past. Some of the most prominent items in this museum include the silverware that Sun Yat-sen once used in 1912, a silver key awarded to William O'hara as a recognition of his contributions to the hotel's development, and a European-style ottoman bench with a flowery carved pattern that was brought to the Astor in the late 19th century.<sup>17</sup> The museum's exhibition is divided into sections on the history of the hotel, Tianjin's architectural culture, the prominent historical figures that once stayed at the hotel, and the leisure and consumer culture that the Astor boasts. The museum

has played an important role in foregrounding the hotel's long and rich history, accentuating its monumental status, and demonstrating its close link with Tianjin's historical transformation. By showcasing a wide range of items that were alleged to have *first* appeared in the Astor Hotel of Tianjin before everywhere else in China (most notably the first telephone and elevator), the museum's display helps reinforce the idea that the city near the Hai River was at the forefront of China's modernisation vis-à-vis other urban centres (Figs. 6 and 7).

Another aspect of the hotel's renewal and commercial relaunch during the past three decades has been in the discursive domain. Through publications sponsored by hotel management, printed and electronic media, and documentaries, the hotel's past has been reframed in a way that enhances its prestige and promotes its publicity. These materials have woven documentary evidence with witnesses' first-hand accounts to forge the Astor Hotel's claims to a historical landmark and architectural monument. These popular discourses have also indicated that the continual presence of the Astor Hotel is a living testament to the city's globally oriented history. Acutely aware of the hotel's historical value, hotel management formed a special research group in 1990 to restore the original features of the hotel and investigate its historical transformation. Under the sponsorship of the Astor,



Fig. 6 The Astor Hotel Museum (Source: the author)

<sup>17</sup> William O'hara was the last owner of the Astor Hotel before its ownership was transferred to the Tianjin Municipal Government. Today, a Western-style restaurant/cocktail bar inside of the Astor—*Hai Wei Lin juuba* (William O'hara Bar)—is named after him.



**Fig. 7** Elevator at the Astor (Source: the author)

two books were published in 1991 and 1993 as part of the hotel management's attempt at 'enterprise cultural construction' (*qiye wenhua jianshe*). Celebratory in tone, these two books emphasised the 'historical value of the Astor' Hotel as manifested in its 'architectural style, the decoration of rooms, and the utensils set out there' (Liu and Tian 1991, 1993, 1–2). At the same time, these local publications tended to underscore the prestige and reputation of the Astor while downplaying its intimate association with Tianjin's semicolonial or hypercolonial conditions during the treaty port era. They also evinced a not-so-subtle sense of local pride when they claimed that the 'historical position of the Astor Hotel' was a result of the 'distinctive economic and political position of Tianjin in China' (Liu and Tian 1993, 495). Similar ideas were expressed in various forms in different public events and platforms. In 1994, the first international conference on the culture of the Astor Hotel was held, and conference attendees emphasised the idea that 'the Astor Hotel was a museum showcasing modern Chinese history and culture'. Later, in the same year, *Lishunde Dafandian* (the Grand Astor Hotel) was published by the World Scientific Publishing Company in Singapore. Unlike the other two books, *Lishunde Dafandian* is a collection of visuals and images designed to commemorate the most significant events related to the hotel's history (Tian 1994). Since the late 1990s, the internet has not only served as

a marketing tool for Astor but also promoted its status as both a symbol of the city's past and a world class site of accommodation. The opening sentence of its official webpage is particularly captivating: 'The Astor Hotel Tianjin, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Tianjin, a central feature of the regeneration of Tianjin's historic centre, the heritage gem evokes the romance of a bygone era with all the contemporary luxuries of a world-class hotel.'<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the Astor-sponsored publications, widespread newspaper reports, along with other types of popular cultural productions, also contributed to the (re) construction of the hotel's status as a historical landmark and monumental site. During the late 1990s, reports on the Astor Hotel and its past abounded in both Chinese and international media, such as the *Tianjin Ribao*, *Guangming Ribao*, *Xinhua News Agency*, *Lianhe Zaobao* based in Singapore, and Asia Television in Hong Kong. Adopting the description of the Astor as a 'museum of Tianjin's and China's past', reports in multiple local and foreign newspapers covered the hotel's large-scale redevelopment and reopening in the 2010s.<sup>19</sup> Three years after the completion of the hotel's redevelopment project, China Central Television (CCTV) collaborated with the General Tourist Company of Tianjin to produce a three-episode documentary named *Lishunde Jishi* (A Chronicle of the Astor) (CCTV 2013). Furthermore, the Astor has been celebrated for its rich past and cultural significance through its portrayals in popular history books and TV shows. For example, a general historical survey of Tianjin published in 2008 entitled *Jindai Zhongguo kan Tianjin* (Modern China Seen through Tianjin) contains a section on the Astor and its historical function as a diplomatic centre (Li 2008). In 2014, a documentary jointly made by the CCTV and Tianjin Radio and TV Station named *Wudadao* (Five Avenues) also mentioned the Astor Hotel not only as a popular destination for accommodation but also as an emblem of Tianjin's complicated past (CCTV and Tianjin Radio and TV Station 2014).

#### 4 Continuity and changes

The Astor Hotel is one of the few existing architectures in Tianjin's former concessions that can be dated back to the 19th century. The question of continuity and changes becomes apparent when we compare the Astor Hotel's functions and symbolic meanings in different historical contexts. On the one hand, the Astor Hotel has remained a prominent fixture for over a century in a city that has undergone profound changes. Even though Tianjin itself has transformed from a treaty port with multiple colonial enclaves to a completely Chinese-run metropolis, some

<sup>18</sup> <http://theastor.hoteltianjin.cn/en>. Accessed 8 March 2024.

<sup>19</sup> For some specific examples, see *Jinwan Bao*, *Chengshi Kuaibao*, *Tianjin Ribao*, *Xianggang Shangbao*, and *Huanqiu Youbao*.

of the key functions of the Astor Hotel, along with its reputation, have not changed much. However, the significance of this hotel has shifted and evolved. At the heart of this section are some specific ways in which elements of continuity and changes in relation to this grand hotel have played out.

#### 4.1 Functions

The Astor Hotel has had many functions across multiple eras. In colonial Tianjin, the hotel not only provided a place of accommodation but also offered standards of design, technology, comfort, and entertainment that were usually associated with those in Euro-American societies. The Astor was among the first electrified buildings in the city, had both hot and cold water, and was even supplied with refrigerated rooms for food storage. It was also a venue for cultural innovation and leisure activities in which foreign expatriates could isolate themselves and find restaurants and facilities that met Western standards. Since the late 1990s, the Astor Hotel has continued to serve most of these functions, but its significance has drastically changed. The emergence of the Astor in the late 19th century mainly compensated for the lack of urban infrastructure necessary for the standards of a European-style life in colonial Tianjin, which is no longer the case, especially when we consider the presence of numerous Western-style shopping malls, restaurants, bars, and nightclubs, as well as other high-end hotels such as Hyatt and Cathay in the city. Despite the change in political regimes, the Astor has remained a prime location for Sino-foreign interactions. The Astor witnessed numerous diplomatic activities during the late Qing period when China's diplomacy was mostly conducted in Tianjin—a gateway city to Beijing. During the Republican period, nationally and internationally prominent figures continued to frequent the hotel due to its fame and prestige. Even during the Mao era, the hotel was still a critical site for the reception of foreign dignitaries and senior members of the Chinese leadership.

#### 4.2 Clientele

When it was first built, the Astor hotel was meant to provide accommodation and storage services for foreign merchants and missionaries in Tianjin. With the evolution of Tianjin into a leading port city in northern China, the scale of the hotel increased, its functions increased, and its clientele diversified. As aforementioned, the Astor Hotel became a crucial site for socialising for both Chinese and foreign elites by the late 1910s and continued to attract eminent visitors during the following decades. Even during the 1950s, when the city was already under socialist rule, the hotel hosted the Dalai Lama and the 10th Panchen Lama in 1954, Zhou Enlai, the

Chinese premier, in 1957, and the famous Chinese opera singer Mei Lanfang, to name a few (Liu and Tian 1993, 203–210). Since the 1990s, the hotel's clientele have further diversified in a rapidly changing political, economic, and social context. The main group of customers that the Astor targets is not limited to businessmen and foreign tourists; it also includes expatriates living in the city and the local population. The diverse patronage has been closely linked with the multiple functions and services offered by the hotel. As a luxury hotel, it offers a place of accommodation for businessmen and foreign visitors, who usually spend a very brief time in the city. It also attracts foreign expatriates interested in the city's architectural infrastructures that have a historical connection with the West. For the local urban dwellers, the Astor hotel provides them with some distance from their immediate urban environment while allowing them to treat themselves to moments of luxury (restaurants, nightclubs, sports facilities) or sometimes to find foreign products for consumption.

#### 4.3 Shifting symbolism

The Astor Hotel's associations with Tianjin's colonial powers, especially the British, affected its meaning in its early years and have continued to shape the hotel's symbolic significance to this day, even though the treaty port system was completely dismantled in the 1940s. Located within the British Concession and managed mostly by the members of the British Municipal Council, the Astor Hotel symbolically conveyed the lifestyles and innovations of the Western world by offering a level of convenience, luxury, and entertainment on par with those at metropolitan hotels during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although the Astor was a physical product of the city's past imperialism, its symbolic meaning has been continuously reinterpreted and reframed in a changing political and socioeconomic context over the past few decades. During the early years of the Reform and Opening-Up era, the hotel continued to be a site of modernity, offering services that the rest of the city rarely provided. Since the 1990s and especially after the 2000s, the hotel's history has been used as a promotional tool, and the efforts to transform or relaunch the Astor by its ownership fit neatly in the construction of a specific historical narrative about Tianjin by the municipal authorities. As the city's powerholders gradually grasped its symbolic significance as an architectural heritage in the 1990s and early 2000s, the hotel's history was constructed in a way that reflects the city's diverse and culturally rich identity. The hotel's shareholders have also been equally aware of the value of the hotel's rebranding as a historic monument for commercial purposes. The renewal of the hotel, accompanied by the restoration of its history, creates an

atmosphere that evokes a strong sense of colonial nostalgia as a form of exotic and romanticised consumerism, which is legitimate given the commercial nature of the hotel. In many ways, the hotel today remains a symbolic place of foreignness and Western-style luxury for the emerging middle classes and foreign visitors alike.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

During the modern colonial era, the history of the modern hospitality industry is an integral, yet underexplored, aspect of the history of Western imperialism.<sup>20</sup> Situated in colonial Tianjin, the history of the Astor Hotel is part of the broader history of grand hotels in the non-Western world. Similar to the hotels in other colonial settings, the Astor provided levels of comfort and luxury that were often associated exclusively with the metropolis. It was an important site for the transfer of technology, industrial and managerial knowledge, as well as the diffusion of consumption habits and commercial leisure. It also featured as a ‘contact zone,’ to use Marie-Louise Pratt’s term (Pratt 1992), where interactions between various national, social, ethnic, gender, and occupational communities transpired. Unlike its counterparts in other colonised contexts, however, the Astor played a different role in that access to the hotel was not overwhelmingly determined by race but rather by class or rather one’s economic capital. In the early 1890s, the Astor began to have Chinese shareholders, and the hotel gradually established itself as a crucial venue for socialising and cultural activity during the 1920s and 1930s.

When the CCP took control of Tianjin in 1949, the built environment presented a challenge, especially since many of the city’s architecture and attractive open spaces (such as Victoria Park) related to its colonial past. A close analysis of the transformation of the Astor Hotel, as a preceding section has shown, provides some interesting insights into the treatment of buildings with ties to imperialism by CCP-led municipal authorities. Prior to the Reform and Opening Up, the local authorities returned to a somewhat simple strategy of removing the hotel’s association with its colonial history by renaming it ‘*Tianjin da jiudian* (the Grand Hotel of Tianjin)’ and using it as a place for receiving foreign dignitaries. This was a sensible option, but a more appealing alternative was to keep the building’s structure and functions largely unaltered, albeit with renovation and expansion, and change its symbolic meanings. In a rapidly changing economic, political, and social context, the Tianjin Municipal Government has come to view the former foreign concessions, along with the buildings therein, as valuable architectural heritage since the 1980s and

1990s. The municipality-led regeneration and reinvention of the Five Avenues (*Wudadao*) and the New Italian Style Town (*Yishi Fengqingqu*) during the 2000s exemplifies this trend (Marinelli 2010; Zhang 2018a; Chauffert-Yvart et al. 2020).<sup>21</sup> Just as this built heritage has been used to define Tianjin’s identity as a globalised city and to attract tourist and business enterprises, so has the Astor Hotel. Through physical modification, the construction of a museum, and the promulgation of cultural production, the Astor has been reinvented as a historical monument and an emblem of the city’s primacy in modernisation, as well as its status as a culturally vibrant, cosmopolitan, and international urban centre. Another similarity lies in the link between Tianjin’s colonial past and its globalising present. The promotion and reframing of the Five Avenues and the New Italian Style Town downplays, if not entirely neglects, these sites’ deep association with imperialist incursions and reduces their complex and multilayered colonial past to a simple façade of world architecture on display. Similarly, the renovation and relaunch of the Astor Hotel has not been as interested in restoring it to its original state as in presenting an outwards appearance of authentic historical structure and upgrading its facilities. The development of the Astor Hotel over the past few decades has been an important part of the broader efforts by the city’s power-holders to reconcile its colonial past with the city’s current globalising ambition.

### Abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
PRC	People’s Republic of China
SMC	Shanghai Municipal Council

### Acknowledgements

It’s no simple matter for a historian by training to write for a heritage-themed journal. I am deeply grateful to Professor Maurizio Marinelli for having invited me to contribute to this wonderful Special Issue. Not only did Professor Marinelli provide insightful comments and feedback for the previous iterations of this article, but he also kindly showed unfailing faith in me over the course of the research and writing process. I also greatly appreciate the generous help and support Professor Plácido Martínez provided over the last few months. In particular, I would like to thank Prof. Martínez for drawing my attention to the apt use of heritage-related terminologies. My thanks also go to the two anonymous reviewers, both of whom offered constructive criticisms for the previous drafts of this article.

### Author’s contributions

All author read and approved the final manuscript.

### Funding

Not applicable.

### Availability of data and materials

Not applicable.

<sup>20</sup> For some references to the history of colonial hotel, see Jennings 2003 and Peleggi 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Other contributors to this Special Issue have discussed this topic in detail. See Liu Xiaochen, The Effects of Commercialisation on Urban heritage in Tianjin: A Study of Citizens Livelihood in the Five Avenues Historical District; Wang Jingting and Maurizio Marinelli, Tianjin’s Italian-style Town: The Conundrum between Conservation Practices and Heritage Value.

## Declarations

### Competing interests

The author declare that he has no competing interests.

Received: 17 November 2023 Accepted: 10 July 2024

Published online: 06 August 2024

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