Why Study Chinese Architecture?

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Translator’s Note
The article that follows was first published in Zhongguo yingzao xuehe huikan (Bulletin of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture), volume 7, number 1, in October 1944, when the journal resumed publishing after a seven-year hiatus. The Society for Research in Chinese Architecture had been founded by Zhu Qiqian (1872–1964) in 1930, and its leading members were Liang Sicheng (1901–72), Liu Dunzhen (1897–1968), and Lin Huiyin (1904–55). The war against Japan that officially broke out in 1937 wreaked havoc on ancient buildings in China, an issue that Liang discusses in the article, and also had a direct and drastic impact on the society, whose members were forced to flee Beijing. They went to southwestern inland China, settling first in Kunming, Yunnan province, in 1938, and then in the small village of Li Zhuang, Sichuan province, in the winter of 1940. Amid the severe material and financial hardships caused by the war, the society also had to endure the departure of its most important members and contributors to its research, including Liu Dunzhen in 1943. The handful of remaining scholars decided to resume publication of the bulletin in 1944, probably writing their journal articles by hand and reproducing the pages lithographically for distribution. The article followed a foreword and acknowledgment in the 1944 issue of the journal. During the society’s existence the journal was to publish only one more issue, in October 1945. Although Liang Sicheng was not named as the author of the article (which was signed only “the editor”) it is usually attributed, reasonably, to Liang Sicheng himself.

Studying Chinese architecture can be seen as a task against the time. Chinese life has become Westernized amid the dramatic changes of recent years, a tendency that has destroyed indigenous architecture and its affiliated arts in China. Although criteria for the newly imported Western arts and crafts have yet to be established, the Chinese have begun to view their old arts and crafts with disdain and disgust. With the popularization of “Western buildings” in the large trade ports, the rich merchants and their middling counterparts alike love the novelty of the new style and consider indigenous Chinese architecture outdated and trite. Even if they may not intend to destroy Chinese architecture altogether, in reality they have replaced many exquisite Chinese structures with so-called Western-style buildings or façades that are mediocre and juvenile executions. Major cities have been largely demolished or altered and then filled with inartistic, confused, and ridiculous constructions. The old cityscape of pure Chinese character, whether delicate or magnificent, is either completely gone or present as a mere shadow of its former self, with no regrets on the part of the public. Historical landmarks that have stood majestically for hundreds of years, city blocks full of special artistic local color—distinguished embodiments of a nation’s culture—have been sacrificed in the name of “improvement.”

A recent example includes the needless destruction last year by the people in charge of numerous exquisitely carved houses and gateways in a county in Gansu province, in order to widen the streets and “rectify” the look of the city. It is as sad to see them destroyed as to see such buildings ruined by the fires of war, yet the people have turned a blind eye, because such destruction has become customary in the past thirty or so years.

Although urban development and architectural renewal are inevitable, even before the war against Japan the scale and speed with which indigenous Chinese architecture has been destroyed and left to decay are unusual. There are three obvious reasons for this phenomenon. First, with the economy depressed, local governments have been unable to protect the many temples and formerly official buildings owned by the government and have left them to decay naturally. Second, with artistic standards temporarily in abeyance and Western arts infiltrating both public and private residences, traditional gardens, streets, and towers, suddenly scorned,
have been severely damaged. Third, both government officials and the public, failing to appreciate architecture as cultural heritage, have been disinclined to cherish and protect old structures.

At present, there may be no force that can stop the destructive craze. As far as new construction is concerned, more time is needed to cultivate the knowledge and skill necessary for artistic progress. All trends are causal effects of history, seemingly containing an element of inevitability. Fortunately at the same time, a consciousness of national culture has arisen in our nation. Collecting physical remains of the past for research has become a principle of modern scholarship. And today an effort is being made to seek something new in the traditional. Chinese architecture, an engineering technology that has continued for about two thousand years, has created and become its own artistic system; many buildings are thus expressions of our culture, forming the large body of our artistic legacy. If we knew anything about respecting the brilliant culture of this ancient nation, and if we were determined to revive our nation and people, we could not afford to ignore the study of Chinese architecture and would research and protect our cultural heritage.

If we awaken society by means of academic research and study and encourage the inclination to protect and preserve Chinese architecture, we might gradually reduce, if not completely stop, its destruction. This task, though it may shift with the times, is as urgent as rescuing precious objects and famous paintings from a fire. It is a sacred responsibility to treasure and protect the cultural legacies of our nation.

Chinese epigraphy, calligraphy, and painting have always been privileged pursuits of the literati. The value attached to them and their appreciation in earlier dynasties put them on a par with poetry and other literary works and provided the basis for the persistence of our nation’s cultural spirit. But architecture, as artistically expressed by technicians and craftsmen for millennia, has shown itself as primarily the unanticipated result of apprenticeship and evolution. In this it bears some similarity to European architecture before the Renaissance. Anonymous craftsmen have given the world many great architectural wonders, but have left little theoretical analysis of their creations and few accounts of their own pretensions.

Thus when one dynasty replaced another, the change was usually accompanied by total destruction, or alteration tantamount to it, of great creations from the earlier period because the new dynasty had no interest in them. Consequently, the habit of objectively appreciating the architecture of an earlier period has never been cultivated in our nation. For instance, during the construction of the Sui and Tang dynasties, no attention was given to protecting objects of the Qin and Han periods. Likewise, Northern Song did not treasure Tang architecture; neither did Ming and Qing care for structures from the Song and Yuan dynasties. The rehabilitation of old buildings, which has always entailed the use of contemporary methods, has altered the form and content of the old structures at will, disregarding their original features. The designation of original construction dates for Buddhist and Daoist temples is merely nominal because the actual halls have usually been carelessly modified. The attitude that informs such disregard, very different from the practice of modeling calligraphy or a painting after an archaic style, deserves critical attention. Not only has the sudden importation of Western-style architecture at the end of the Qing dynasty put more strain on the lifeline of old buildings, but it has also placed the whole city under attack.

Without objective criteria to assess the value of the world’s essential artistic creations for their protection, most of them might well have been destroyed whenever power changed hands or taste changed direction. In Europe and America, preservation of old architecture has begun only in relatively recent times. Before the nineteenth century it was common practice to destroy ancient art. The fortunate survival of some art can usually be attributed to chance or the durability of materials. But as archaeology became the passion of the nineteenth century, discussions of the objective value of art from all periods and nations increased and an awareness of the need to protect old objects came into being. For instance, during this war [World War II], experts have accompanied the Allied Forces on the front, assigned to protect the ancient architecture of occupied areas or enemy states. Our nation, which is still discarding and destroying old objects, has not yet progressed to the sober-minded retrospection that prevails now in Europe and America. A sense of the need to preserve the nation’s architecture and allied arts such as sculpture and mural painting is born of society’s objective appreciation, which in turn makes artistic study indispensable.

The preservation of China’s architectural heritage today can help revive Chinese architecture in the future, a more important task. We should not overlook the relationship between appreciating and criticizing the arts of the past and creating art in the future.

Architecture has progressed well beyond the intuitive production of medieval craftsmen since the beginning of the Renaissance in Western nations. The study of architectural history and theory became the basis of the art of architecture. Field research institutes were established in various nations; travel funds were granted for the study of architecture; art galleries and museums were set up; historical buildings were protected, with experts assigned to study and restore them.
so that they could be appreciated by the public. As a result, modern architectural creation in the West, along with the other arts such as sculpture, painting, music, and literature, has developed as a synthesis of understanding and experience, invested with a new ideal and expressed as a new form.

What is the future of a new [architectural] expression in our nation?

That artistic creation cannot be completely independent of past traditions requires no explanation in China, a country that so values the study of calligraphy and painting. All those who are capable of original creation are well versed in tradition. Even when a novel form suddenly becomes predominant under the influence of foreign ideas, it can express the Chinese spirit. For example, Buddhist sculpture of the Northern and Southern dynasties, and the pagoda from the Tang and Song periods, both of which originated in India rather than from ideas indigenous to China, have nevertheless become known throughout the world as forms of fully developed and characteristic Chinese art in a Chinese style. Artistic advancement is built upon the rich foundation of cultural heritage, and naturally the future development of Chinese architecture is no exception.

Without a doubt, China in the future will use Western technology and a vast quantity of modern Western building materials. To preserve and promote the characteristics of our nation’s architecture—the result of the anonymous craftsmen’s inadvertent contributions in the past—is the responsibility of modern architects today. How to express characteristically Chinese style and meaning while simultaneously using the materials and methods of the new science, or how to grow new branches out of the old tree—that is truly a problem.

European and American architecture was once restricted by “classicism” and “schools.” It is developing new forms now, thanks to the principles of scientific structure, but because all these forms are derived directly from the Western system, they pose almost no contradiction to the urban environment of most Western cities. Although transplanting a large number of such buildings into old-style Chinese cities now would be precipitate, to say the least, should they be allowed in the future as rowdy guests, to displace their hosts and deprive Chinese cities of their old look? We can choose to address this issue or to evade it. Until now, the cityscape of China was usually altered by ignorant craftsmen, who have typically abandoned indigenous styles and structures, regardless of their historical and artistic value, to create a ridiculous architecture that is neither Chinese nor Western.

To see the architecture of a city of the ancient Orient completely stripped of its artistic character would be sad, in terms of both cultural expression and visual impact, for it would represent the decline and even extinction of our culture. In the past forty years major trade ports, such as Shanghai, Tianjin, Guangzhou, and Hankou, have been busy modeling themselves after secondary commercial cities of Europe and America, an unmistakable reflection of the time of foreign economic invasion. Most of the construction originated with foreigners in the concessions, and the Chinese simply imitated their efforts. Such architecture shows no sign whatsoever of the spirit of a Chinese renaissance.

In the future, construction must be a considered undertaking even when we must also adopt Western methods to comply with the scientific trend in architecture. Architects with knowledge and expertise would take the lead, and they would inevitably treat elements of the artistic realm in a scientific structure as unique expressions. These architects, by synthesizing aesthetics and intelligence, would contribute to the renaissance of the Chinese spirit. This creative spark, ignited even before the war against Japan, is exemplified by palatial-style architecture.

But the latest architectural engineering and a clear-headed perspective on architectural theory suggest that palatial-style architecture is no longer suited to the modern scientific and artistic ideal. This style grew out of an appreciation of the appearance of Chinese architecture. The architect wishing to retain the majestic glazed roof tiles ended up only approximating the look of the Chinese hall, using new materials and new technology. Its form copies that of Qing-style palaces and official buildings; its structure and plan imitate those of Western classicism. For the most part, details such as the proportions of its windows follow the Western system, whereas the gates and balustrades generally replicate the best of Chinese architecture. It is an uncomfortable collage of elements from Eastern and Western systems, usually those from historical periods. It resembles most the period architecture that was once popular in Europe and America. Furthermore, because its extravagant cost makes it inappropriate under ordinary economic circumstances, it is unlikely to be popularized. The failure of some efforts at palatial-style architecture is analogous to that of a written essay that falls short on account of verbosity, plagiarism, and awkward rhetoric. Nevertheless, because even this kind of effort evinces the Chinese spirit raising its head, the palatial style is significant.

The more completely we have understood the structure of iron and steel and chemical materials in architectural engineering, the more efficiently we have used these materials. Form is nothing but the logic of composition; and composition is nothing but the best and most elegant solution to the practical problem. This particular interrelationship of form and composition has become indeed an abstract ideal of
architecture. We certainly cannot oppose this ideal in the future. We need to reexamine the structural logic of old architecture, just as those who are devoted to new literature need also to understand the structure and grammar of classical Chinese. There are many possible ways to express the Chinese spirit; the palatial style is but one of them.

To extract the essential Chinese character of old architecture, we need to improve our understanding of its structural system and composition. The structural frame, or interconnection of horizontal and vertical supports, is usually an organic system, which is then supplemented by a rough or distinct profile, color painting and engraving, and such details as the disposition of doors and windows. These engineering and artistic treatments most often represent Chinese wisdom and aesthetics worthy of our study. Many compositions, whether as large as a city or town or as small as a house or garden, are responses to our life and thought, deserving our new analysis. We have our traditional customs and taste: our family organization, our living standard, work, and recreation, as well as cooking, sewing, interior décor of calligraphy and painting, outdoor gardens and plantings, none of them the same as for a Westerner. Our architecture used to be the overall expression of all these elements of customs and taste. We do not need now to cut our feet to fit into European or American shoes, or force our lives to comply with European and American arrangements, or overturn the function of European and American architecture. We need to create an architecture that is appropriate for us.

If we could preserve ancient and stately edifices, tree-lined avenues, forecourts of old government buildings, or elegant archways in the urban center, they would speak their Chinese identity much more eloquently and emphatically than those petty and humble, simplistic and crude foreign-style fountains or monuments made of concrete. Besides, those imitations of foreign decoration are merely poor copies of their marble “sculptural” counterparts in the urban centers of China. Infused with traditional spirit, the grand memorial masonry sculptures in European and American city centers continued the bloodline of their Greek and Roman and Renaissance ancestors, with a boldness too strong, an accomplishment too sophisticated, to be equaled or even approximated in a day. What our architects need to do in this respect is look to the gems in our own artistic treasury. We should study Han dynasty qie pillars, Northern and Southern dynasties stone sculptures, Tang and Song Dhanari columns, and Ming and Qing memorial archways, as well as stele pavilions, school ponds, screen walls, stone bridges, and the arrangement and engraving of buabiao columns, and use them intelligently in our creations.

Artistic study helps cultivate a sense of beauty, which guides the use of materials, whether wood, stone, chemical synthetics, or steel and iron, all potentially capable of producing architecture of unique style and taste. Nations of the world have created the so-called International Style under the influence of the latest structural principles, but each nation and people expresses the style differently. Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Northern Europe, and Japan have all created their own peculiar national style, suited to their individual environment and taste. Our nation’s rich artistic foundation points to more diverse directions of development. Not only can new Chinese architecture and urban planning emerge, but they also are expected to produce astonishing achievements.

With this expectation in mind, we should prepare by gathering and organizing, insofar as we can, materials worthy of reference. An immediate imperative is to keep a systematic and methodical record of representative architectural remains in measurements, drawings, and photographs. The fate of old objects is at such risk as to make research a race with destructive forces. More fieldwork will benefit scholarly research and can also promote an awareness in society of the need for historic preservation. Another indispensable step in our study is to understand the laws of traditional construction technology. To do so is as necessary as studying the vocabulary and grammar of a country’s language before trying to appreciate its literature. Thus the few technical treatises that survive—Li Jie’s Building Standards of the Song dynasty, Rules and Regulations of Construction from the Ministry of Works of the Qing dynasty, even the popular carpenter’s manual Lu Ban Jing—all need to be clearly interpreted for the elements and terminology in them, with modern drawings and illustrations to facilitate research. The primary goal of studying the actual building is to analyze and dispassionately examine its engineering and artistic value, and the stylistic and technical evolution of successive periods. Knowing others as well as themselves, learning something fresh from reexamining something old, architects already equipped with scientific technology are further aided by the knowledge and taste of our own nation, and their creative power will be strengthened before they realize it. Herein lies the most extraordinary significance of studying Chinese architecture.

**Note**

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