

## In the Absence of Authenticity: An Interpretation of Contemporary Chinese Architecture

by Pu Miao

**T**HE HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE in China begins in 1949 with that year's fundamental changes in the country's social infrastructure. In 1978 the Economic Reform brought on another important phase in the development of China and its architecture. Since the Reform, the volume of construction has expanded dramatically<sup>1</sup>. However, many architectural critics, both in China and abroad, agree that contemporary Chinese architecture as an art has yet to develop a language specific to its own unique conditions<sup>2</sup>.

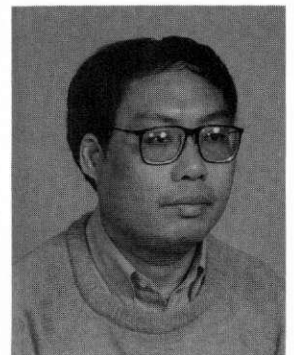
Using German philosopher Martin Heidegger's theory of authenticity as a tool, this paper offers a personal opinion of what has gone wrong with Chinese architecture and attempts an explanation of the causes. The paper concludes that the responsibility lies in the absence of shared values relevant to today's China and in the innate timidity of Chinese intellectuals in creating such values.

It should be noted that there have been some brave architectural experiments in recent years, such as the Guangzhou School in the 1970s. However, the new spirits have been few and short-lived, and they are not representative of the thinking of mainstream Chinese architects. The problematic state of architecture in China has been the topic of a few insightful Chinese architectural critics such as Zeng Shao-fen and Cheng Zhi-hua. Nonetheless, their arguments have basically followed the traditional battle line of "modern" versus "national"; the deep roots of the problems have never been explored.

### *Authenticity in Architecture*

Why should we examine Chinese architecture through Heidegger's eyes? His insights have been tremendously influential in the culture

Like human beings, architecture has to choose its way of existence: a personality true to one's own nature or the preconceived roles of an actor. From this Heideggerian view, the paper examines the formal characteristics of contemporary Chinese architecture. It also explores how social and cultural conditions and intellectuals' sense of responsibility have contributed to the current state of architecture in China.



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of contemporary western society which is widely used in China today as a model in a “universal world civilization”<sup>3</sup>. It would be interesting to see how Chinese architecture rates according to a standard it holds high.

Heidegger develops his concept of “authenticity” with an inquiry into the essence of entities such as a human being, a living culture, or an institution. According to Heidegger, such entities do not have a definite way of being as a table or house does. They define their nature in each moment of their existence. A human being or culture could have three ways of defining itself: “it can, in its very Being, ‘choose’ itself and win itself; it can also lose itself and never win itself; or only ‘seem’ to do so”. A person, for example, may actively choose an objective for his life by his own conscious will; he may not want to pursue the meaning of his existence at all; or he may identify himself with certain social stereotypes to escape the burden of creating his own identity, happily believing that he has already found the meaning of his being. Heidegger calls the first case the “authentic” mode of existence, and the other two “inauthentic”<sup>4</sup>.

By applying Heidegger’s philosophy to environmental design, Canadian geographer Edward Relph identifies the two modes of existence as manifested in place-making. An authentic place is “the total expression of a culture through an unselfconscious design tradition” or through “the selfconscious attempt to express man’s condition and humanity”<sup>5</sup>. This echoes Heidegger’s use of a Greek temple and a farmhouse in the Black Forest of Germany to illustrate how a building as a work of art can “open up” the “truth”, namely the essence of a people’s being<sup>6</sup>. By contrast, the makers of inauthentic places either gather cultural clichés—images superficially related to the culture (the “kitsch” approach)—or enforce a pre-conceived political or economic agenda, completely disregarding the users (the “technique” planning).<sup>7</sup>

To simplify our discussion, we may conclude that an authentic architecture must actively seek forms which plainly express the true conditions of its users’ social, cultural, and economic life. In concrete terms, the forms chosen should be those that best reflect utilitarian and cultural functions, available construction technology, and the economy of the particular society<sup>8</sup>. Unfortunately, contemporary architecture in China is far from fulfilling these criteria.

### **Three Symptoms of Contemporary Chinese Architecture**

In order to reveal the formal characteristics and underlying values of contemporary Chinese architecture, I have in my research examined major architectural works, especially those which won awards in China or were published in major Chinese professional journals. I have also analyzed the ideas manifested by the designers and reviewers of those works. Three prevailing traits can be iden-

tified: imitation in overall design strategy, false image-making in the particular treatment of a building, and an affected manner in the general appearance of designs. These traits indicate an inauthentic approach to place-making.

#### *Imitation as a Design Approach*

No matter how many articles in Chinese architectural journals declare their appreciation for originality in architectural design, there is in reality among Chinese architects a fundamental fear of designing without a stylistic model. The generally accepted design process as revealed in many architects' descriptions of their projects consists of two steps: first, choosing one or several models from a menu of styles, and second, displaying their design talent by making a clever copy of one model or an ingenious blend of different vocabularies.

It should be noted that the available models do not include all styles. They must be powerful, established architectural conventions with appropriate political, moral, or other meanings. Any marginal, unfamiliar, or symbolically undesirable language is out of the question. In a process such as this, design is no longer an intuition of the living culture. It becomes instead an intellectual play of dead forms from other times and places. The ultimate purpose of the game is to disseminate ideologies which have unfortunately often proved to be the opposite of what their proponents claimed them to be for today's China.

During the schematic design phase of the Great Hall of the People in Beijing (1959), for example, leading architects selected four models to evaluate the schemes. They were "Modern Chinese", "Modern Western" (Modernism), "Chinese Classical", and "Western Classical" styles<sup>9</sup>. Eventually the "Western Classical" model was chosen because of its similarity to the "socialist realistic" architecture of Stalin's Soviet Union, a model society for China at that time. Meanwhile, some Chinese palatial decorations were mixed in as a gesture to Chinese nationalism, the other official ingredient of the Chinese communist revolution. It is interesting to note that, due to its political prestige, the Great Hall itself later became a model for similar projects in provincial capitals.

The widely spread trend of imitation has created a design methodology quite similar to that of 19th Century European eclectic architecture. Each building type is assigned an appropriate style, such as Russian Classical for government buildings, Chinese Classical for cultural institutions and gardens, Chinese Vernacular for tourist facilities, the traditional building styles of national minorities for projects in areas dominated by those minorities, 1930's Modern for mass housing and utilitarian buildings, and current western fashions (such as Postmodernism and Deconstructivism) for

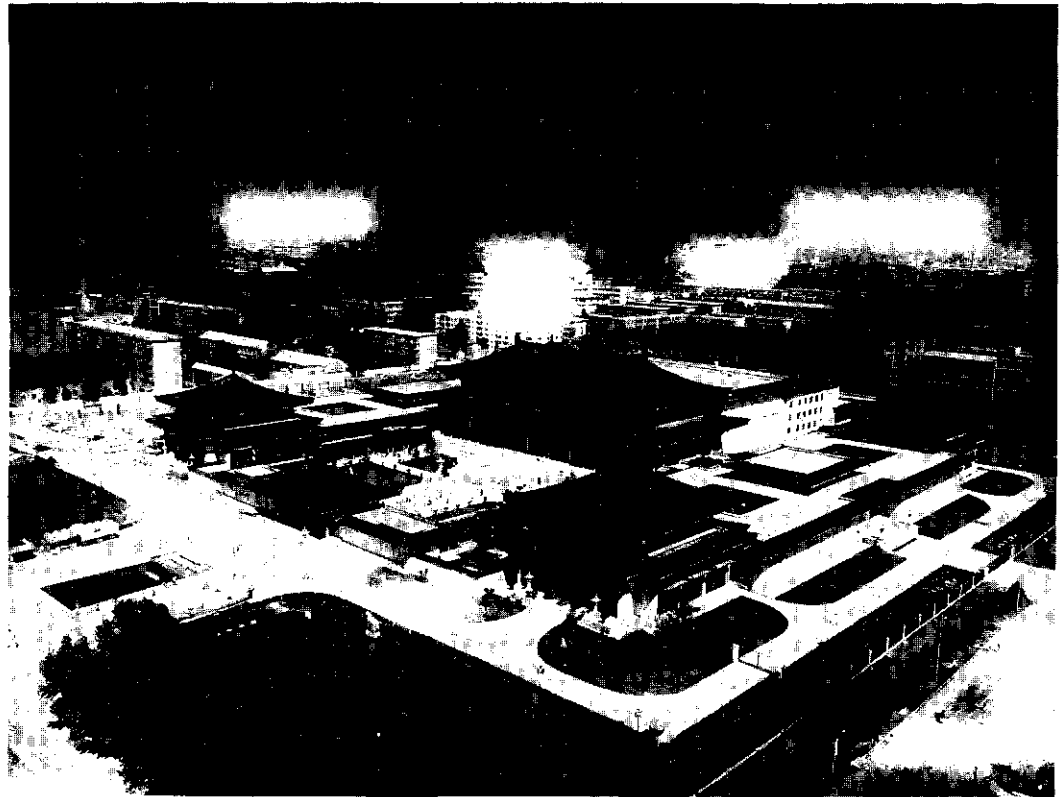


Fig. 1: Shanxi Historical Museum, Xian (1991). Northwest China Architectural Design Institute.

buildings with “modern” functions or locations (such as a high-rise commercial building on a site of no historical significance). In addition, each style is associated with a fixed symbolic meaning, such as Russian Classical for socialism, Chinese traditional revivals for nationalism, and current styles for the “spirit of the times”.

The recipes of imitation preempt any attempt at creativity. They have produced many stereotyped and thoughtless solutions. An urban designer, for example, proposed multi-level highway crossings surrounded by high-rise apartment towers in densely populated Shanghai to express “socialist modernization”<sup>10</sup>. Many architects believe that buildings are made “modern” by the use of “modern” materials and the juxtaposition of large glass curtains and solid walls<sup>11</sup>. In the 1980s, the designer of a public park near Hong Kong built a 4,170-ft (1,380 m) long copy of the Long Corridor at the Summer Palace, Beijing (1888)<sup>12</sup>.

Design reviews and architectural competitions in China have further perpetuated the design strategy of imitation. Architectural critics and competition jurors search for the vocabularies of familiar models. They recognize only designs easily categorized by stylistic labels. They tend to promote architects who have skillfully manipulated function and construction to fit the form of an “appropriate” model chosen from the menu discussed above<sup>13</sup>. In such a climate, genuine experiments, which are difficult to classify, are destined to



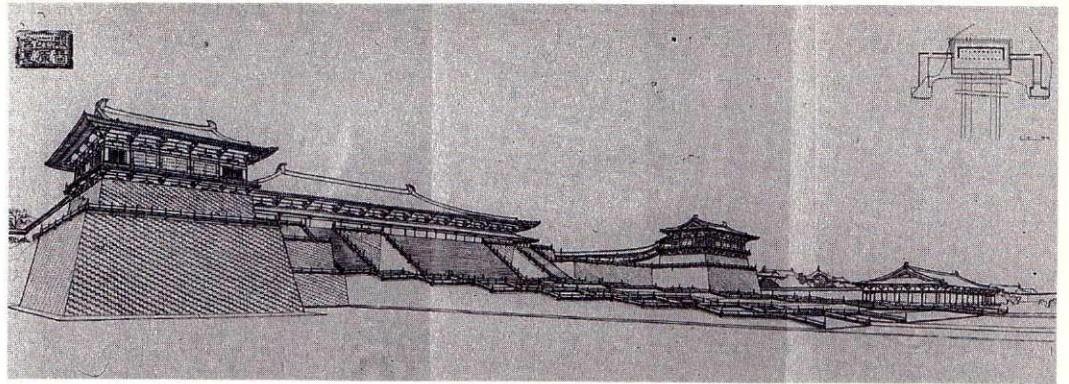


Fig. 2: Hanyuan Hall of Daming Palace, Xian (c 634 AD). (N/A).

die in obscurity. It is no wonder that of the eight buildings which won the prestigious 1988–1992 Architectural Creation Awards of the Architectural Society of China (the Chinese equivalent of the American Institute of Architects), at least four are based on immediately recognizable models of architectural style<sup>14</sup>.

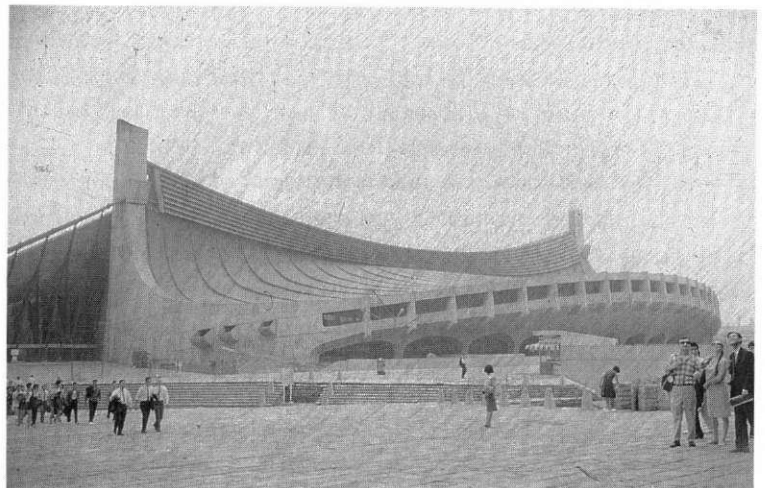
The most well-known results of this trend of imitation are two projects which have won several prestigious awards in China. Both of them enjoyed special attention from the government, a lengthy design process, and a generous budget, privileges which eliminate any excuse for such mediocre results. The first is the Shanxi Historical Museum, Xian (1991) [fig. 1]. Both its general layout and building elevations are derived from the Hanyuan Hall of Daming Palace, Xian (634 AD) [fig. 2]. The architect claims that only a historical style is appropriate for a museum of history in a historic city<sup>15</sup>. From such reasoning one can but conclude that little progress has been made in the sixty years since the revival of Chinese Classicism<sup>16</sup>. The second well-known imitation is the National Olympic Center in Beijing (1990), which copied its principle concept from Japanese architect Kenzo Tange's National Gymnasium, Tokyo (1961) [figs. 3 and 4]. The Chinese clone differs from the original in its awkward proportions, clumsy details, and faked tensile catenary roof (see below). Ironically, this roof, an imitation of a Japanese design, is hailed as a symbol of Chinese nationalism<sup>17</sup>.

My point here is not that originality always produces better designs than copying, but rather that since contemporary China presents a social and cultural scenario quite different from that of ancient China or any other country in the world, Chinese architects must develop formal languages *unique* to their own times and society. This is especially true for the few important public buildings. Unfortunately, most contemporary Chinese architects have used the design strategy of imitation to shelter themselves from the anxious freedom of genuine creativity.

Fig. 3:  
National Olympic center,  
Beijing (1990). Beijing  
Architectural Design  
Institute.



Fig. 4:  
National Gymnasium,  
Tokyo (1961)  
by Kenzo Tange.



#### *Fake Details*

The phenomenon of fake details is a necessary by-product of the imitative design approach discussed above. When an architect transplants a style into a soil whose social, cultural, and economic conditions are quite different from those of the original site, he inevitably generates gaps between the borrowed image and the local conditions. These conditions include the necessary functions, available building materials and construction technology, and the resources bearable by the society. Without the determination to create new forms, falsifying appearances is the easiest and perhaps the only way to mend these gaps. This section, then, deals with inauthenticity in the execution of design concepts<sup>18</sup>.

Architects who imitate traditional styles have first used fake detailing as one of their initial design principles. The Que-li Hotel, Qufu (1984), for example, is a Chinese Classical revival design. Its apparently traditional sloping roof is supposed to be made of clay roof tiles laid on wooden boards supported by timber joists. Due

to the scarcity of lumber in China today, the roof tiles are actually supported by a reinforced concrete shell under which a relief of stucco “joists” was later applied<sup>19</sup>. Such inventions appear in the numerous classical or vernacular revival buildings and gardens all over the country.

False image-making is not limited to buildings which mimic traditional styles. Following the Economic Reform of 1978, many new entrepreneurs are eager to make their real estate properties or business headquarters appear “western” or “modern”. In architectural terms, this means high-rise buildings, glass or metal curtain walls, exposed metal structures, and so on. However, most Chinese contractors lack experience with other construction methods than mid-rise brick buildings with a stucco finish. In addition, the young capitalists of China cannot bear the extravagance of real “western” building. Thus brick bearing wall structures are made to look like concrete frames, or like steel-framed buildings by covering them in aluminum skins. A six-story building may be made to appear to be twelve stories by adding a continuous canopy in the middle of the window band of each floor<sup>20</sup>.

One common and revealing phenomenon is the fake curtain wall. In commercial buildings one often finds a blank brick wall hidden behind a large reflective glass curtain. The Chinese owner cannot afford the transparent multi-story lobby at the bottom of a tower he has seen in pictures of foreign cities: having just begun to accumulate capital, he needs to squeeze out as much rentable space as possible. He cannot afford a steel stud and gypsum board partition wall behind the glass since, in China, such prefabricated products are still more expensive than those made by manual labor on site. Finally, even when the client can pay for a new construction system, the contractors often refuse because they lack the necessary expertise. These functional, economic, and technical discrepancies between image and reality inevitably result in a fake architecture.

The practice of false image-making has become pervasive in China, thoroughly saturating the minds of architects. This is apparent from numerous projects in the everyday environment. The Lin Baixin High School in Chaoyang (1991), a rural facility built on a limited donation, actually has a well-functioning scheme [fig. 5]. It would be a superb design if not for false images like the red steel truss at the entrance (the actual structural system is a mixture of brick bearing wall and concrete frame), the irrelevant pieces of “traditional” tile roofs, and the artificial arches at the end of the corridor. But such a pervasive practice occurs compulsively, even in projects for which a large budget and a first-rate design service are available. The National Olympic Center in Beijing, as mentioned previously, imitates the form of a tensile catenary roof, though the structure is in fact built up of a series of curved trusses.



Fig. 5: Lin Baixin High School, Chaoyang, Guangdong Prov. (1991). Shantou Architectural Design Inst.

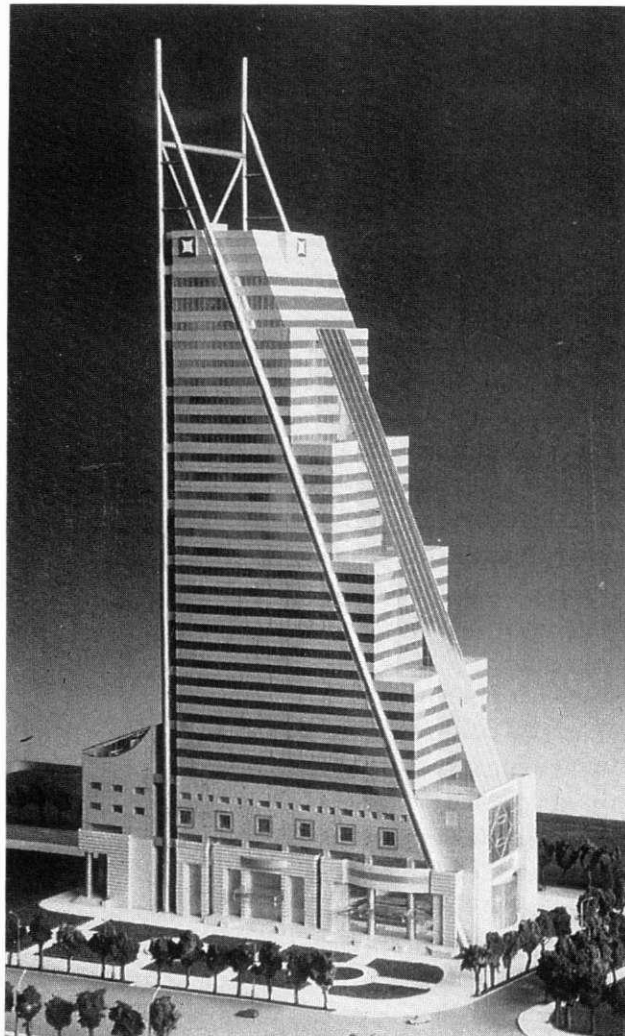


Fig. 6: Shenzhen Development Bank, Shenzhen, Guangdong Prov. (1993). Huayi Design Consultants, Ltd.

Similarly, the metal frame in the scheme of the sumptuous Shenzhen Development Bank, Shenzhen (1993), has no inherent relation to the structural system [fig. 6]; it is the client and his architect's high-tech lie.

#### *Affected Manners*

This section deals with an architectural dimension quite different from the two described above. Rather than tangible principles of "do" and "don't" in design strategy and detailing, it has to do with the preference for a certain kind of experience, "atmosphere", or aesthetic "taste", which can only be observed and described phenomenologically. This dimension corresponds to what architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz calls the "characteristics" of a place<sup>21</sup>. I will demonstrate that the prevailing characteristics of contemporary Chinese architecture indicate an inauthentic attitude because they do not represent the basic cultural values still held by most Chinese.





Chinese architects' preference for certain kinds of visual qualities is best revealed in projects which allow the designers artistic freedom. This observation is supported by architects' descriptions of their designs, and particularly in the adjectives they favor to describe their work. One of these sought-after qualities is a weightless, delicate, and genteel (*qing-qiao, ya-zhi*) appearance. Another inspires youthful (*zhao-qi*) and cheerful (*huan-kuai*) emotions. Still another is grand (*xiong-wei*), rich (*feng-fu, duo-bian*), and luxurious (*hua-li*) gestures. In short, all have an excess of sensation, or what I call "affected manners".

These popular qualities may be seen in the forms, materials, and colors of a building or interior. For example, Chinese architects tend to give exposed building elements, such as beams and columns, a slim appearance. Streamlined configurations, such as spirals and sweeping curves, express the "upbeat spirit" of modern China. Cosmetic decorations, such as curved windows, wall reliefs, and motifs with trivial symbols, are indiscriminately used to "beautify" the surfaces of buildings. Historical clichés such as monumental steps and arches create a sumptuous effect even in projects – such as a children's library – for which monumentality is inappropriate. To give brick wall construction an expensive look, Chinese architects frequently apply shiny, colorful skins to building surfaces. Popular choices are ceramic mosaic, polished metal panels, mirrors, murals, and the fake glass curtain walls mentioned previously. Due to aesthetic tastes and the inevitably poor workmanship, designers avoid using the natural appearance of structural materials for architectural expression. The exposed brick wall, used frequently in the 50's, has disappeared from their vocabulary. Exposed concrete has seldom been used in the elevations of a building except for factories, highway structures, and other utilitarian buildings. Finally, anyone who has visited a Chinese city recently will recall the sea of light creamy colors, off-

Fig. 7: Zhenjiang Hotel, Zhenjiang, Jiangsu Prov. (1990). East China Architectural Design Institute.

Fig. 8:  
Shenzhen Railway Station,  
Shenzhen, Guangdong  
Prov. (c 1990). Huyai  
Design Consultants, Ltd.



white, light yellow, and pink, juxtaposed here and there with gaudy accents.

The Zhenjiang Hotel (1990) exhibits the typical weightless feeling of many contemporary buildings in China [fig. 7]. The slender members of the skeleton roof (a necessary gesture to the national style), the completely white, smooth surfaces, and the decorative window shapes all contribute to a sense of frivolous lightness. Another example, the Shenzhen Railway Station (1992) is a good illustration of cosmetic beauty [fig. 8]. The architect included various curves, arches, and round windows in the elevations. Like the patterns on a stage set, they are merely a thin skin layer applied to the surface of the body of the building. These artificial shapes, with their flimsy appearance and white color, create a superficial grandeur and richness unrelated to the structure and function of the building. The same may be said of the enormous crimson truss canopy which, too high to shelter passers by from the rain, exists solely to reinforce the showy atmosphere. The winning scheme for the Shanghai Museum Competition of 1993 furnishes yet another example [fig. 9]. Rather than exploring an innovative spatial structure, the architectural expression of the design mainly consists of reliefs on the walls and four large decorative arches which are supposed to resemble the handles of ancient bronzeware.

Such affected manners lack authenticity because they fail to express the real cultural preferences deeply rooted in the hearts of most Chinese people. While the cultural values of modern Chinese society are an issue too large to be thoroughly examined here, we do have some concise statements made by influential writers on the subject. According to Lin Yu-tang and Liang Shu-ming, two keen observers of Chinese culture, *simplicity, frugality, and conservatism* are among China's most prominent national characteristics<sup>22</sup>.

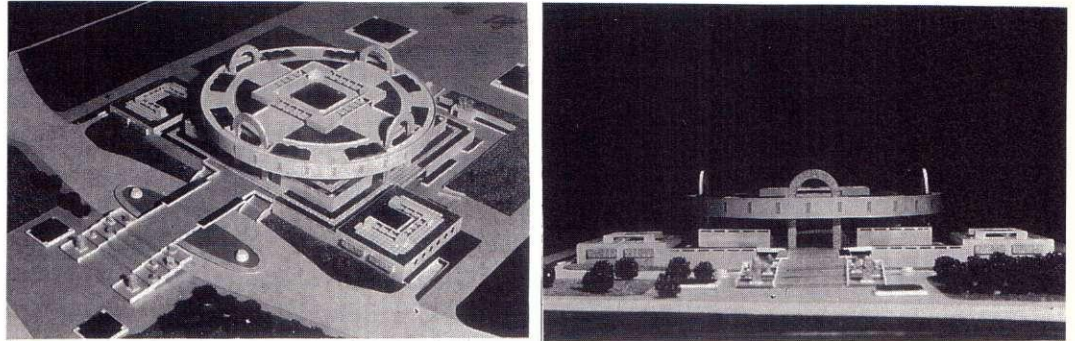


Fig. 9: Shanghai Museum (1993). Shanghai Architectural Design Institute.

Even after modernization one can still observe these traits in the everyday behavior of common people. *Controlled manners between people, seriousness toward life, a reserved attitude in the face of changes, and a lifestyle of thrift* are principles not only highly valued but actually practiced.

It is impossible and unnecessary to pinpoint specific architectural expressions which correspond exactly to these cultural values. However, the artificial lightness and sumptuous manner described here have definitely failed to convey the true spirit of Chinese culture. While we await the emergence of an authentic modern architecture, a look into traditional villages, houses, and other common places may hint at what genuine architectural expression can be. These traditional environments are *straightforward, simple, solemn, and heavy*. Authenticity abounds in the frank articulation of infill wall and framing system, in the strong, dark timber beams and columns and the natural textures of brick and stone, and the way the form of the sloped roof is generated by structure and function. We see authenticity in the weighty but relaxed stance of the buildings, and the tranquility of neighborhoods and villages enveloped in endless shades of grey and green. It would be dangerous to confuse contemporary culture with that of feudal times. Nevertheless, authentic qualities, still alive in the people of China, must continue to find manifestation in the fine arts.

### **The Roots of Inauthenticity**

Why has contemporary Chinese architecture displayed these symptoms of inauthenticity? I will argue that the primary cause is the lack of strong collective beliefs or shared values in China today. By cultural values I mean beliefs shared by the whole society, such as life goals, standards by which we judge success and failure, lifestyle ideals, and aesthetic tastes. Contemporary Chinese society has lost most of its shared values in the past two decades due to both external and internal causes.



*External Cause: Socioeconomic Instability*

The external cause is the social, political, and economic unrest that began with the 1840 Opium War when the western and Japanese colonial powers began invading feudal China. Since then China has been shaken by the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1912, the following turmoil within the young Nationalist Republic, the Japanese invasion of 1937, the Civil War of 1947, the communist takeover two years later, the economic disaster of the “Great Leap Forward” in the late 1950s, the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, and the Economic Reform of 1978. Chinese society has been devastated at regular intervals of about ten years by dramatic alterations in the constitution of its political or economic system, or both<sup>23</sup>. This political and economic instability has been a serious hindrance to the development and maturation of a modern culture.

Culture as refined human endeavor beyond “the pursuit of practical aims” is always formulated by the social class which enjoys the most respect, resources, and leisure in society<sup>24</sup>. In addition the emergence, growth, and sustainment of shared beliefs depends upon society’s ability to absorb the nutrients of the national historic heritage bestowed upon it. The turbulent history of modern China saw the destruction of the rural gentry and their culture but did not allow a period of stability long enough for an industrial middle class and its culture to establish themselves. A good example can be found in the history of modern Chinese literature. The 1920’s and 1930’s produced a group of excellent writers whose works, nurtured by both tradition and the new spirit, began to form a new cultural paradigm of the urban middle class. Unfortunately, these writers all stopped producing meaningful work shortly after the 1949 revolution. The communists have since that time failed to create a mature culture of their own due to the failure of their experiment, the transcendence of the elite (the Economic Reform has opened a new way to control power), and their self-imposed isolation from existing cultural contexts. The Economic Reform has since 1978 given birth to a new middle class. However, the new elite still need time to develop their culture, if not to consider their fragile status in the uncertain climate of Chinese politics and economic policy.

It should be noted that, while a writer can write under any conditions, an architect is by the nature of his medium more sensitive to social and economic stability. To some extent, the unsatisfactory state of architecture in China up to the Economic Reform may be attributed to the scarcity of construction and to budget limitations which deprived architects of the opportunity for experimentation with their art. Interference from shifting political policy has played a damaging role in architectural design, criticism, and



education since 1949. Consequently, most Chinese architects have only a rudimentary knowledge of basic architectural history and theory.

*Internal Cause: Lack of Metaphysical Thinking*

The foreign colonial powers and the communist movement alone cannot account for the problems. Chinese culture, shaped over the past two thousand years, contains some seeds of self-destruction. The most critical is the neglect of metaphysical, transcendental thinking aimed at revealing truths of broad validity rather than conforming to current practical needs. This defect and its consequences have been pointed out by both critics and advocates of traditional culture. Contemporary philosopher Li Hou-ze, for example, writes that what he calls “*practical rationality*” is “one of the most important characteristics of Chinese people’s thinking and cultural behavior”:

This rationality emphasizes practical applicability. Metaphysical thinking and metaphysical issues are thus deemed unnecessary pursuits (...). What is important is how to deal skillfully with the various consequences of these issues in everyday life<sup>25</sup>.

A Neo-Confucianist philosopher, Tang Jun-yi, maintains that the Chinese have only “an ideal internal to each individual’s everyday existence” instead of “a transcendental and objectified ideal outside the individual’s everyday existence.” He cautions about the results:

We should understand that, without an objectified, transcendental ideal, we Chinese are prone to the appeal of natural inertia and survival instincts, easily shirking our responsibility in practice. The so-called Chinese flexibility then becomes evasiveness and irresponsibility. Unable to improve itself by adhering to an objectified ideal, the human spirit tends to degenerate following man’s natural tendencies. When this happens, all our brilliant wisdom, profound knowledge, and graceful etiquette become merely excuses for hypocrisy<sup>26</sup>.

The destructive effects of this weakness in Chinese culture become especially visible whenever a new development throws out familiar beliefs – an all too frequent situation in the history of modern China. In these times of chaos, the Chinese tend to act on survival instincts, putting off the pursuit of justice, integrity, or beauty. In such circumstances people grasp at anything immediately useful, act only in self-interest, or adopt an ideology that affords instant hope and comfort, without examining the nature or long-term social and moral consequences of their actions. By the same token, Chinese society tends to shy away from serious analysis of a failed

ideology when such an assessment can implicate current practice or disturb the current social "harmony", thus insuring the repetition of failures.

#### *Cultural Nihilism and Irresponsible Intellectuals*

As a result of the external and internal causes examined above, Chinese society today suffers from the absence of shared values, a phenomenon which I shall call "cultural nihilism"<sup>27</sup>. Since neither traditional nor new values appeal strongly to the entire society, people now focus instead on basic material needs. Beyond the immediate necessities, individuals find comfort in patching together useful fragments from old ideologies and a superficial understanding of "advanced" western culture. Among these fragments, nationalism probably enjoys the most popularity as an anesthetic for soothing hurt pride. Genuine moral and aesthetic ideals have no place in this cultural vacuum.

A society, regardless of its historical misfortunes, does not lose its cultural values permanently as long as it can recreate them. Post-war Japan is a good example. It is the intellectuals in society that bear the responsibility for the regeneration of culture. Jerzy Szacki has summarized intellectuals' "creative role" as "interpreters of the world, producers of ideas, depositories of cultural values, etc.". Szacki quotes Max Weber's assertion that "intellectuals are seen from this point of view as a 'group of men who by virtue of their peculiarity have special access to certain achievements considered to be "cultural values", and who, therefore, usurp the leadership of a cultural community'"<sup>28</sup>.

Chinese intellectuals, however, have played a largely *conformist* role in the current crisis. Jerome B. Grieder observed that "although modern Chinese intellectuals have rejected much of their inheritance, they have received from it much which they did not, perhaps could not, renounce"<sup>29</sup>. One attribute they have maintained from the past is certainly the "pragmatic rationality" discussed previously. The combination of the painful memory of suppression before 1976, the influence of the pragmatic tradition, and the allure of cultural nihilism has produced an opportunist and collaborationist attitude among Chinese intellectuals. It is no longer unusual for a renowned writer or artist to suddenly become general manager of a soft drink company or the like<sup>30</sup>. The majority of educated Chinese have thus relinquished their responsibility for creating and defending new cultural values pertinent to society. Instead, they use their professional skills to serve the needs of whatever social force currently has the most political or economic power, be it the old communist guards, the young capitalists, the local government bureaucrats, or the multi-national corporations.

None of the players in today's political arena feels absolutely safe.

The communists know they are losing control over the public, while the new entrepreneurs try to make as much money as possible before the Party changes its policy again. To strengthen their vulnerable positions, these powerful clients demand from culture not works of art but *symbols*. These symbols refer not to lasting cultural values but rather to ideologies immediately useful to the patrons, such as nationalism or commercialism. In achieving this goal, the symbols take on forms which rely on conventions sanctioned by the masses, and whose appearance creates a strong immediate impression. In this context, the social powers have wasted no time in using architecture as one of the most prominent media for their propaganda. Deng Xiao-ping, for example, promotes the communists' "socialist modernization" by proclaiming, "Let us *build* another Hong Kong" in China.

In the past fifteen years, the direct political interference in art and other cultural domains so familiar to westerners has greatly diminished. Rather than responding with a burst of creative spirit, however, Chinese architecture has as yet made only flamboyant and empty gestures. The above analysis offers one explanation of why contemporary architecture in China has been dominated by imitation, fake detailing, and superficiality. It is time for Chinese architects to stop blaming history and look seriously into the role their own irresponsibility has played in perpetuating this inauthenticity.

### **Epilogue: The Way to Authenticity**

Is there a way for Chinese architecture to break free from its current standstill? Can human will defy the array of socioeconomic hindrances facing architects in China? And will the globalization of culture and economy allow them the freedom to cultivate a unique language? Again, the answers have both external and internal aspects. Social and economic infrastructure is key to any significant cultural development, and China awaits the emergence of a new urban middle class confident enough to commission and protect intellectuals in pursuing a new set of cultural values. Some architects, however, may not wait for such a golden age. Driven by the human will to express their deepest feelings, they may sacrifice immediate personal gain to explore unconventional opportunities. By experimenting they may find points at which to break through the present impasse and develop a new architectural language true to the reality of today's China. A work of art, as a cultural paradigm, can awaken the soul of a people and expedite the coming of a new age of shared ideals<sup>31</sup>. However, Chinese architects and their western critics should both realize that the new architectural forms, if they ever appear, will not spring from preconceived, "appropriate" models such as "non-western" or "modernized nationalist" styles. As

Paul Ricoeur notes, surprise and scandal are inevitable ingredients in any true creation:

Creativity eludes all definition, is not amenable to planning and the decisions of a party or State. The artist – to take him as one example of cultural creativity – gives expression to his nation only if he does not intend it and if no one orders him to do it. For if one could direct him to do it beforehand, that would mean that what he is going to produce has already been said in the language of everyday technical and political prose: his creation would be false. We can only know after the fact if the artist has really communicated with the stratum of fundamental images which have made the culture of his nation<sup>32</sup>.

### Notes

*AJ* = *Architectural Journal* (Beijing)

*AT* = *The Architect* (Beijing)

The translations of Chinese titles and quotations in this paper are my own.

Romanization is in the pin-yin system.

1. Zhou Gan-shi, "Chinese Architecture 2000", *AJ* May 1993, pp. 2–6.
2. For example see Academic Committee, Department of Architecture, Qinghua University, "Architecture, Today and Tomorrow", *AT* vol. 33, p. 6; John Morris Dixon, "Chinese Boom Town", *Progressive Architecture* September 1994, pp. 49–52; Richard D. Rush, "Shanghai: Home of the Handmade High-rise", *Progressive Architecture* March 1995, pp. 35–6. Up to now there has been no single design by a Chinese contemporary architect being featured in a major international journal of architecture.
3. Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), pp. 271–86.
4. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 68; Herbert L. Dreyfus, *Being in the World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 14–6, 25–8.
5. Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976), p. 78.
6. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 41–50, 160–1.
7. Relph, p. 87.
8. The theory of "honest" form was questioned in British architectural historian David Watkin's *Morality and Architecture* (London: Clarendon Press, 1977). However, Watkin's argument



is not very convincing. People may appreciate a building form which is irrelevant to its function and construction, such as the cited Victorian hospital with air-conditioning system. But isn't it better to have an enjoyable form which also corresponds to other aspects of the building?

9. Zhang Bo, "Architects' Education", *AT* vol. 12, p. 5.
10. She Xiao-bai, "Urban Spaces of Shanghai", *AT* vol. 24, p. 69.
11. For example see Li Hui-xian, "Museum of Nanyue King's Tomb, Guangzhou", *AT* vol. 29, pp. 89–91, and Zhang Jin-qiu, "Shanxi History Museum", *AJ* September 1991, pp. 23–4.
12. Yuan Jing-shen, "The Architecture of Shenzhen", *AT* vol. 30, pp. 14–7.
13. For example see Yang Yong-sheng & Gu Meng-chao, "Comments on the Design Competition for the Yunsheng Plaza, Fuzhou", *AT* vol. 53, pp. 59–61; Xiao Mo, ed., *Chinese Architecture 1980–1989* (Beijing: Jingji Guanli, 1991).
14. See *AJ* January 1994, p. 14.
15. Zhang Jin-qiu, "Shanxi Historical Museum", *AJ* September 1991, pp. 23–4.
16. Such as the Beijing Library (1929) and the Central Museum, Nanjing (1937).
17. Ma Guo-xin, "The Planning of National Olympic Center", *AJ* September 1990, p. 13.
18. Some Post-Modernists also did fake things. Even though I do not condone them either, it should be pointed out that, while a Post-Modern design acknowledges or even jokes about its own fakeness, the Chinese examples really want viewers believe in what they are faking.
19. Zeng Shao-fen, "Three Approaches in Architectural Design", *AT* vol. 36, p. 3.
20. Xiong Ming, "Problems in Architectural Design", *AT* vol. 2, p. 72; Bai Zuo-min, "Unity and Variation", *AT* vol. 4, p. 220.
21. See C. Norberg-Schultz, *Genius Loci* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980).
22. Lin Yutang, *My Country and My People* (New York: John Day, 1935), pp. 39, 43; Liang Shu-ming, *Zhong-guo Wenhua Yaoyi* (*The Essence of Chinese Culture*) (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1989), pp. 22–3.
23. Readers unfamiliar with contemporary Chinese history may consult with Jean Chesneaux's *China: The People's Republic, 1949–1976* (New York Pantheon, 1979).
24. Julian Benda, *The Betrayal of the Intellectuals* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 30.
25. Li Ze-hou, *Zhong-guo Gudai Sixiang Shilun* (*On the History of Chinese Ancient Thoughts*) (Beijing: Renmin, 1985), pp. 29–30.
26. Tang Jun-yi, *Tang Jun-yi Quanji* (*The Complete Works of Tang Jun-yi*) (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, 1991), pp. 508–10.

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27. Thus the Chinese Nihilism should not be identified with the nihilism of western post-modern society.
28. Ian Maclean, et al, ed., *The Political Responsibility of Intellectuals* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 233.
29. Jerome B. Grieder, *Intellectuals and the State in Modern China, A Narrative History* (New York: The Free Press, 1981), p. 1.
30. For an example of the cultural nihilism in the profession of architecture, see Wang Zheng-zhang, "Architectural Education under the Challenge of Commercialism", *AJ* March 1994, pp. 24-6.
31. Dreyfus, pp. 338-9.
32. Ricoeur, p. 281.

*English text revision: John Krause.*