

WANG Shu and the Possibilities of Architectural Regionalism in China

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein

Nordic Journal of Architectural Research
Volume 21, No 1, 2009, 14 pages
Nordic Association for Architectural Research
Thorsten Botz-Bornstein
Gulf University for Science and Technology, College of Arts and Sciences Philosophy
Hawally, Kuwait

Abstract:

The article introduces the work of the Chinese experimental architect WANG Shu who practices "Critical Regionalism" in China by developing, among other things, the principle of "free design" that he derives from Chinese garden architecture. Further the article examines the possibilities of critical regionalism within a typically Chinese socio-cultural context that is determined by a particular relationship with history. A critical philosophical tradition (in the west developed by Humboldt and Ranke) is absent in Chinese thought. Neither in Qing China, during the years of attempted reforms, nor during the "Hundred Days Reform" or the "Chinese Renaissance," has

Chinese thought been able to establish a critical tradition. The author discusses if contemporary Chinese architects will be able to create a valuable Chinese environment flowing out of a critical interchange with China's history.

Keywords:

Wang Shu, contemporary Chinese architecture, critical regionalism, Chinese civilization, Leopold von Ranke, Enlightenment architecture.

INTRODUCTION

In today's China, "elitist" architecture by Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid or Steven Holl is present as much as quick imitations of some indistinct "international style" or – much worse – the so called "Disneyland syndrome" buildings recurrent in satellite towns with distinctly German, Italian, or Tudor architectural styles.¹ Attempts to be creative are easily blurred by sublimated ideas from a recent authoritarian past² even when – or especially when – they opt for the "postmodernist," existential choice of grasping something of China's lost cultural identity. As many Chinese architects are still lost in translating Western aesthetic forms for a Chinese public, creativity remains most often restricted to the production of experimental skyscrapers with "cut-outs" and occasional pagoda roofs.

In Russia it had become obvious in the 1980s-1990s that architects working during socialist eras "had never been exposed to the kind of building practice which is required to produce subtly differentiated objects."³ China discovered a similar truth a little later. The first problem is that the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) crippled the country's architectural development by suspending the entire higher education system for more than ten years; the second problem is that today's outmoded institutional practices seem to be unable to handle the architectural challenges brought by the overwhelming economic boom.

In general, according to John Czaplicka regarding Russia, "socialist architecture tends to be unresponsive to the natural environment, local customs, and the built heritage of particular places or regions." Usually, "derisive epithets such as 'feudal', 'bourgeois', and 'capitalist' were directed at the historical substance."⁴ This is certainly also true for China, but in spite of this, China's architectural history is full of relatively successful attempts to combine foreign construction methods with Chinese aesthetics, reaching from the so-called "adaptive Chinese Renaissance" of the 1920 and 1930⁵ to I.M. Pei's overtly modern though unmistakably Chinese *Fragrant Hill Hotel* from 1982. The problem is that these examples are limited and restricted to certain periods. In the 1970, the communists ended up with a sort of extreme modernism and even when they had been tempted by traditional stylistic expressions⁶ they opted rather for a blunt form of imitative traditionalism that is so well exemplified by the metaphorically charged design of the Beijing Railway Station.

Xin Ruan holds that "much of the Twentieth Century Chinese architecture, unfortunately, does not seem to have matched the expectations of 'critical regionalism' (as modern architecture did in Japan or India)."⁷ Part of the phenomenon might be due to the Chinese addiction to modernism. Everywhere in the world, as explains Douglas Reichert Powell, "since the high period of modernism in the 1950s, 'regional' has been a pejorative term"⁸ and certainly also in "modernist" China one would translate "regional" as "limited," "local," and "provincial." Contrary to such evidence, one cannot state that the Chinese architects were striving to become particularly cosmopolitan.

1. WANG Shu

WANG Shu (born in 1963) is one of the most experimental Chinese architects and is often mentioned together with Yung Ho CHANG, MA Qingyun, and LIU Jiakun as a typical representative of a new generation.⁹ Above that, Wang Shu is one of the few architects who practice "Critical Regionalism" in China. The term Critical Regionalism was introduced in 1981 by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre in their article "The Grid and the Pathway" and in 1983 Kenneth Frampton authored an article on the same subject.¹¹ According to the definition of these authors, Critical Regionalism emphasizes the importance of "placeness" by considering contextual elements like scenery, historical references, and light, without falling into imitation and traditionalism. In the present article I would not only like to introduce the work of WANG Shu but also take his work as a starting point for further reflections on the significance of "Critical Regionalism" in the particular cultural and historical environment of China.

While many of Wang's colleagues seem to excel in copying skyscraper projects from architectural reviews or specialize in façades for commercial architecture, Wang insists that he designs "a house instead of a building:" "When I say 'house' I think of something that is closer to life, closer to everyday life."¹² Wang's apparent architectural fundamentalism is not supposed to create an out-of-the-world attitude but strives to attain professional and political freedom and to resist ideological and commercial purposes. *Amateur Architecture* (the name of his studio) is therefore "spontaneous and experimental" as opposed to "official"; "temporary" as opposed to "monumental;" "critical and thoughtful" as opposed to "built;" and "illegal" as opposed to "sanctioned."

Wang explains that his architecture is “spontaneous for the simple reason that “for me architecture is a matter of everyday life. I criticize in modern architecture that it has not really found a method enabling architects to get back to real everyday life.” Wang does not want his architecture to be “significant” in any political sense, but rather establishes it in terms of place and local history. An architect, he insists, is first of all a researcher and scholar; secondly a craftsman; and only thirdly a builder. Above that Wang defines himself as an intellectual or a writer.

Amateur Architecture invites the active participation of architects and artists and remains open to spontaneous changes. In particular, Wang developed the “free design process,” a design able to adapt itself constantly in response to the conditions of the environment as they appear during the building phase. In principle, “free design” is the method of creating a Chinese garden, explains Wang, for the simple reason that a Chinese garden cannot really be designed:

A Chinese garden is the result of a construction process. I would like to make this a principle of modern architecture. When I build something I am always free to change certain things. Incidentally, this is also typical for the Chinese situation. Lots of unforeseeable things happen here all the time and you have to improvise. It is useless to make a precise plan but it is better to solve problems at the moment they arise.

As a consequence, for Wang’s work not *jian* 间 (place) – or its Japanese equivalent *ma* 間 –, but *yuan* 园 (garden) represents the most significant conceptual guideline.

Wang is certainly less well known than the extremely successful MA Qingyun and less international than the Beijing-based CHANG Yung Ho, both of whom have been classified as “regionalist.” Wang considers TONG Jun, one of the first architects to undertake systematic research into the Jiangnan Gardens in Suzhou, as his principal Chinese influence.¹³ From the international set Wang likes Carlo Scarpa, Aldo Rossi, Alvaro Siza, and Louis Kahn while Tadao Ando has interested him only briefly. If anything, Wang likes only Ando’s early works and believes that, in general, Ando’s regionalism unfolded almost from the beginning too much on an international level: “Ando’s focus is not on particular cultural items while my regionalism is more preoccupied with details.”

Provocatively, Wang insists on the temporary character of amateur architecture, which is not meant as a “throw away architecture:”

I simply think that architecture should work hand in hand with time. Sometimes I like to use cheap material that can be exchanged when it is damaged. And I like to associate buildings and plants. When buildings and plants come together it becomes most obvious that, as long as time keeps running, architecture is subjected to constant changes.

Wang is a rebel who feels close to the culture of his generation often called *liumang* (hooligan) culture claiming that, at one point, he had been influenced by the *liumang* writer Wang Shuo:

When I graduated from university I was a liumang. Our generation was against all sorts of systems but we had no alternative to offer. However, I am not cynical like Wang Shuo because even though I destroy things I build something new in their place. I am always thinking of the future, which has not been the case for the hooligans of the 1980s. In 1986 there was a conference held in Beijing called “How Can we Internationalize Chinese Architecture?” I went there and said: “Since in China we have neither architects nor architecture, the title of your conference simply does not make sense.” You can believe me that there was quite a stir in the audience. But what I said was true. At that time there was no architectural critique, there was no theory in China. An architect was somebody who knew how to draw, he could be drawing all day long but he was not necessarily thinking about what he was drawing.

According to Wang, the situation has changed, but not necessarily for the better: “If I would say the same thing today at an architectural conference it is very much possible that simply nobody would bother. Today people are mainly interested in money and business.”

By calling his agency “Amateur Architecture Studio” and by simultaneously insisting on the importance of the “handicraft aspect” of architecture Wang aims to distance himself, in a provocative manner, from the professionalized, technicized, and soulless “architecture as business” attitude of present China:

A hundred years ago architecture had no theoretical foundation at all in China but the people who built houses were artisans. Now an official architectural system has been established reaching



from the city to the countryside. I chose hand-craft and amateur spirit in order to oppose something to this system. In the end, for me, to be an artisan or an amateur is almost the same thing.

Since its foundation in 1998, Wang's "Amateur Architecture Studio" (which Wang manages with his partner LU Wenyu) has realized three large scale projects: The Wenzheng Library of Suzhou University; the Harbor Art Museum in Ningbo; and, most recently, the Xiangshan Campus of the Chinese Academy of Art built on a 65000 m² ground in Hangzhou which is composed of ten buildings, including a library, a gallery, a stadium, a workshop tower, six academic buildings, two traditional style bridges, and two hillside art studios. Just completed is the impressive Vertical Apartment House in Hangzhou (strangely reminiscent of Paul Rudolph's Wisma Dharmala House in Jakarta). In addition, the Amateur Architecture Studio

has been engaged in various experimental research projects such as the "Ceramic Tea House" at the Jinhua Architecture Park in Jinhua.

Wang pays scrupulous attention to the genius of place. When designing the Library of Wenzheng College of Suzhou University on an artificial lakeside,¹⁴ for example, he considered the traditional prescription of Suzhou gardening, which suggests that buildings located between mountains and water should not be prominent. This led to the decision to sink nearly half of the library underground. Another traditional gardening principle is to use different scales for each building which is the reason why the four additional buildings of the library are much smaller than the main body. Though Xin Ruan finds that "internally the building is a simple shed" (*New China Architecture*, p. 180), the twisted building with a white, box-like pavilion at the end overlooking the lake

*Vertical Apartment House.
Photo: Amateur Studio*



*Ceramic Tea House.
Photo: Amateur Studio*

seems to find its justification within the forested hill site.

Wang was guided by similar ideas when designing the Xiangshan Campus in Hangzhou: "As slopes, twists, and turns occur on site, the

building twists and transforms accordingly, and thus addresses uniformity and variability at the same time. The inevitable bulk of the buildings is purposefully lowered and the horizontal sun-screen slope emphasizes the horizontal extension of the corresponding mountain range."



Wen Zheng Library.
Photo: Amateur Studio

The use of agriculture as the main element of the landscape design instead of ornamental landscaping is remarkable.

Like CHANG Yung Ho, Wang is fascinated by Chinese quadrangle courtyard houses and the plan of the campus integrates the Chinese character “田” which can also be interpreted as a “田” and which Wang serially reproduced. In the character “田” building and nature occupy, each of them, one half. Finding that the simple and straightforward shape of the traditional Chinese court is able to accommodate nearly all architectural functions, Wang created a free typology based on the “田” court able to respond to the requirements of this gigantic space.

Some of Wang’s principles echo CHANG Yung Ho’s premise of “basic architecture” or “architecture-in-itself.” However, though it might be similar in certain aspects to Chang’s “Unusual Architecture” (*feichang jianzhu*), Wang’s architecture is “more concrete” as he intensively explores traditional construction techniques and building cultures. The stone base of the Craft Shop School of the Xiangshan Campus, for example, is laid using a method common in the local construction of tea fields. Wang had also salvaged over two million tiles of different ages and sizes from demolished traditional houses which now cover the roofs of the campus buildings.

The Ningbo Contemporary Art Museum (2 photos possible) is located in the Ningbo Port area and is, as Wang affirms, “a typical example of good cooperation with regional politicians”

because the local government actively supported his ideas about regionalism. Most parts of the historic port buildings had to be destroyed for security reasons. Still, Wang attempted to rebuild a “Chinese ceremonial space” by dividing the building perpendicularly into upper and lower parts, which corresponds not only to Chinese tradition but also responds to contemporary economic needs. The lower part of the museum is reserved for commercial exhibitions while the upper part holds art exhibitions. The gray bricks that are used for the foundation of the main building are original bricks salvaged from the destroyed building; the steel and timber elements in the upper part, on the other hand, suggest an affinity with ships and harbor buildings. Along the river, there is a group of caves laid with bricks containing Buddha figures, which evokes the historical fact that the building had once been the starting point for pilgrimages.

2. The Possibilities of Critical Regionalism in China

Kenneth Frampton saw critical regionalism exemplified by Jørn Utzon’s Bagsvaerd Church (1973-76) near Copenhagen, which represents, according to Frampton, a self-conscious synthesis of universal civilization and world culture. The combination of “universal” elements like the concrete outer shell of the church, with an organic and individualistic interior and a roof shape reminiscent of pagodas as a reference to “world culture,” make, in the eyes of Frampton, this architecture simultaneously “resistant” and modern (*Prospects...* p. 154).

Xiangsan Campus.
Photo: Amateur Studio



This self-conscious “critical” or “resistant” stance necessarily included in Critical Regionalism, which enables the architect to be *both* resistant *and* modern, that is, to distance himself from *both* the Enlightenment myth of progress *and* the pre-industrial past, is far from natural in China. Though the Chinese (like the Japanese) had developed doctrines relatively early that emphasized the necessity of Asian essence (*ti*) and Western functionality (*iyong*)¹⁶ and aimed, at least sporadically, at a reconciliation of Chinese and Western elements in architecture, regionalism has never been established as a critical architectural movement.

This lack is even more flagrant today when it has become impossible to impute these difficulties to the country’s lack of prosperity or to the absence of a desire to realize a national identity (features that Frampton pointed out in 1983 as necessary conditions for the emergence of Critical Regionalism). Finally, even the hangovers of the past communist modernist style as well as the aggressive influence of the present “capitalist” international style might turn out to be minor issues. I would hold that the main obstacle for the establishment of critical architecture in China is rather the absence of a real Chinese self-critical enlightenment tradition.¹⁷

This is not the place to discuss Chinese intellectual history in general; still I would like to highlight some points that I consider being important for the formation of regional architecture in China. “Architecture-in-itself is not found before in modern China,” confirms ZHU Jianfei¹⁸ and Peter Eisenman states that architecture in Asia is, in principle, conservative and accommodating because there is no tradition of resistance. Eisenman refers to the importance attributed to critical thinking in late 18th century Europe – developed, in particular, by Kant and Giovanni Battista Piranesi – that

strongly contributed to the formation of a critical consciousness among European architects. Eisenman points out that such tradition cannot be found in Asia.¹⁹

As a matter of fact, the “critical” instance of Critical Regionalism cannot be traced back to aesthetics or architectural theory only, but has been developed even more abundantly in the realm of historical science as generations of European intellectuals attempted to give meaning to the concept of “critical history.” Discussions by Barthold Niebuhr (1776-1831) and especially by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) in his *The Idealist Theory of Historiography*, laid the ground for a *critical form of historicism*. Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) as well as a subsequent set of philosophers represented by Wilhelm Dilthey, Wilhelm Windelband, and Heinrich Rickert, helped to define historical science as a discipline distinct from both inductive scientific research and metaphysical speculation. Ranke, who has often been called the father of historical science,²⁰ argued that the works of Antiquity and the Renaissance should be used to *reconstruct* history and that preservation or the establishment of authenticity should never be an end in itself. Ranke explained that the present always organizes the past but that at the same time the goals of the present will always be achieved through history: “The particular is transformed by the universal, at the same time defending itself against the latter and reacting to it.”²¹ Ranke viewed history not in the sense of Hegel’s absolute ideas but as the intentions and thoughts of concrete individuals and institutions. His conclusion is that “only critically researched history can be regarded as history” (p. 157) and that the “problem for the historian is not the relevance of the past period to the present, but rather the difficulty of seeing each era from an objective universal perspective” (ibid.).²²

There are many more examples of complex or even paradoxical concepts of history and its perception in European thought; all I want to show here is that in China such a tradition is not present and that this must have consequences for the development of Chinese Critical Regionalism. In Qing China, during the years of attempted reforms, intellectuals became aware of a certain lack of a critical method with which to approach history. The late 19th century Chinese reformer LIANG Qichao complained that "China, so proud of its ancient civilization and long history, had failed to use them to its advantage. The past had become a dead weight that held society back."²³ Liang had been influenced by the reform philosophies of Meiji Japan, where he had studied. The reform that he and other Chinese intellectuals suggested, however, entered history as the "Hundred Days Reform" because it was cut short by nationalist politicians.²⁴ Many Chinese intellectuals of this time regretted the absence of a critical

tradition, among them the historian LUO Jialun who wrote in 1920: "Chinese culture and society are truly depressing these days. Not only are they depressing at the present, but they may be said to have been this way for two thousand years. Europe, on the other hand, has experienced ceaseless progress since the Renaissance. The creative force in Western civilization is, simply, the spirit of criticism."²⁵

The "Chinese Renaissance," led by the philosopher and linguist HU Shih, has been most instrumental for a revolution in sinological studies but had limited influence on other branches of the humanities because of long term political developments in China. The "Chinese Renaissance" also tackled the problem of history, as reports Hu: "When, in 1917, I began my course on the History of Chinese Philosophy with the age of the poets and ignored all the previous periods of sage-rulers, the treatment was considered by the conservative students as

*Ningbo Contemporary Art Museum.
Photo: Amateur Studio*





*Ningbo Contemporary Art Museum.
Photo: Amateur Studio*

so outrageous that it almost created a revolt in my class.” Students criticized, for example, his denial of the historical existence of the Hsia Dynasty, one of the three dynasties of antiquity.²⁶ Still Hu and his group had understood what China was lacking: “It was not enough to have a critical method; the method must be self-conscious so that it may be able to criticize itself against loose application” (77).

It is not difficult to link these facts to concrete expressions of Chinese architecture. In the 1970s, the sinologists Simon Leys and F.W. Mote expressed their amazement at the utmost negligence with which the Chinese used to treat the material heritage of their past.²⁷ This China, which has had such a long history and which was so heavily loaded with memories, had remarkably few historical monuments to visit. While Europe has kept, in spite of its wars

and destructions, monuments dating from Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, in China – except for the few most famous items – the monumental past has been practically absent. Leys insists that this is not just the result of the destructions carried out during the Cultural Revolution but, that in the beginning, the revolutionaries did not find much to destroy. Behind all this Leys and Mote find a particular Chinese concept of civilization through which the cultural development of a country is not interpreted in terms of material manifestations but in terms of “writing.” While the West has an antique presence made of authentically ancient physical objects, China does not have those “because of (...) a different attitude towards the way of achieving the enduring monument.”²⁸ Derk Bodde has reduced this phenomenon to a brief formula by opposing Western *civilization of buildings* to a Chinese *civilization of writing*:

*Our word “civilization” goes back to a Latin root having to do with “citizen” and “city.” The Chinese counterpart, actually a binome, wen hua, literally means “the transforming [i.e. civilizing] influence of writing. In other words, for us the essence of civilization is urbanization; for the Chinese it is the art of writing.”*²⁹

A typical example is Suzhou’s Great Pagoda that passes as Suzhou’s “Statue of antiquity.” However, Mote claims that “no building with such a pedigree would count for much as an authentic antiquity even in the United States, much less in Rome” (p. 50). The Pagoda, whose origins go back to the third century, is a twentieth century construction that has constantly been rebuilt over the centuries and nothing of what can be found in it is what a Westerner would call authentic. The point is that

Chinese civilization did not lodge its history in buildings. Even its most grandiose palace and city complexes stressed grand layout, the employment of space, and not buildings, which were added as a relatively impermanent superstructure. Chinese civilization seems not to have regarded its history as violated or abused when the historic monuments collapsed or burned, as long as they would be replaced and restored, and their functions regained. In short, we can say that the real past of Soochow is a past of the mind; its imperishable elements are moments of human experience. (p. 51)

According to Mote, the Chinese past was not made of stone but of words: “China kept the largest and longest-enduring of all mankind’s

documentations of the past. It constantly scrutinized that past as recorded in words, and caused it to function in the life of its present” (p. 51). They built no Acropolis but monuments of the mind. The Maple Bride in Suzhou, for example, is not important as an *object* but exists only as a bit of psycho-historical material or as a “poetic place” in literary history. Official and historical “descriptions” of the bridge consist most frequently of a poem and “in all that psycho-historical material associated with the Maple Bridge, the bridge as an object is of little importance; we are not told of what material it is built, how big it is, or what it looks like” (p. 52). The poems capture “moments of experience or of reflection involving the bridge” or involve earlier poems inspired in some indirect way by the bridge.

Suzhou is a city of ancient monuments, which contains almost no ancient buildings at all. The “duration” of the monument is spiritual rather than material and any “authenticity” must be seen as virtual. This means that in China, the past, tradition, and culture were not present and real in the first place but they were made of words. Not surprisingly, a past made of words is elusive.

LU Xun defined the Chinese past as a perpetually elusive enemy, as an invisible, immaterial, but indestructible shadow or ghost. Mote and Ley hold that the buildings are “ideas” or items derived from the consciousness of the Chinese who knew the poems:

The literary remains merely sampled in the gazetteers, and more fully present in the libraries of scholars, are to Soochow as is the Forum to Rome. From them every educated Chinese could reconstruct a real Soochow in his mind, with cracks and the scars that mar old stones (p. 53).

Vernacular Mysticism

It is useful to structure this phenomenon by using the concepts of the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari who divide human language into four categories: vernacular language (here), referential language (there), vehicular language (everywhere), and mythical language (beyond).³⁰ In the domain of architecture this constellation can be reproduced like this: While the international style speaks the vehicular language of the everywhere, Critical Regionalism does not aim, as does regionalism, at the reinstallation of a strong vernacular “Here” but rather at the vernacularization of referential elements. Here we recog-

nize that something is different in China. What seems to be so particular about Chinese architecture, and what is relevant in the context of the present discussion, is that in China *tradition* is marked off by the combination of the vernacular (here) and the mythical (beyond), that is, by “mythical vernacularism.” In the past, no matter if it came to Confucian movements, mathematics or architecture, scholars and architects dealt mainly with “sacred” writings that had their origin in an ideal order of reality and were supposed to contain all knowledge pertinent to the field.³¹ “Mythical vernacularism,” that is, tradition inscribed in the realm of the ideal, represented a kind of “virtual reality” in which culture – of which also architecture is an example – was contained in a non-material fashion. The *manifestations* of this ideal architectural reality (the buildings), on the other hand, were relatively rarely represented by concrete items that could be seen and visited but were rather systematically destroyed. Architectural culture (like the rest of Chinese culture) was rather preserved, in a “virtual” manner, in texts and in the minds of China’s (learned) people.

The provocative question that we are confronted with today is how Critical Regionalism can function in a culture in which the architectural past is more virtual than concrete. The European enlightenment tradition which led from the late eighteenth century to the avant-garde, and which was constantly refashioned with regard to new intellectual elements flowing out of the ideological struggle *of or with* the rising bourgeoisie, left its distinctive mark also on European architecture. Whatever this struggle might have looked like in each particular case, enlightened or “avant-garde” architects had to combat a *real* past and a *real* tradition present in the form of objects. Finally, Critical Regionalism flows out of this tradition.

Curiously, in Europe, the avant-garde tradition faded out just at the moment cultural reality came to be presented in a more and more virtual-globalized fashion. Eisenman claims that the 200-year European project of critical enlightenment thought exhausted itself in the middle of the twentieth century, for economic reasons, but also because the concept of architecture had undergone dramatic changes. A new media-based concept of architecture (already criticized by Frampton in his 1983 essay)

which explores the iconic, image-like, or “sceneographic” character of architecture at the expense of its more “authentic,” object-like, tactile aspect, and which is, above that, globalized, has made any critical discourse on architecture difficult. In China, on the other hand, it is the *historical background* that is represented by a virtual, non-critical cultural environment.

Conclusion

When we ask here if the new generation of Chinese architects will be able to take a critical view not only at the West but also at themselves we mean more precisely: will young Chinese architects be able to do more than complacently add some more images to the stock of “Chinese looking buildings” referring to a virtual past? The task is difficult, especially given the fact that still in the 1980s, according to Wang Shu, “there was no architectural critique, there was no theory in China.” Will Chinese architects be able to create a valuable Chinese environment with works that flow out of a critical interchange with China’s own history? Obviously, “history” is here not just the classics. Most probably these architects will have to refer to May 4th values, to Westernized Shanghai architecture or to the “adaptive Chinese Renaissance” of the 1920s, or even to a Shanghai film culture that appeared already ninety years ago in the form of what film scholars call today “vernacular modernism.” We are at the beginning of a new era.

Finally, in the midst of this situation Wang Shu remains optimistic. Though in China, “destroy and rebuild” is an important tradition and though, in his view, “this time they want to destroy *absolutely everything*,” Wang also believes that “in China the tension between central government and regional politics is less intense than foreigners generally think.” The reason is that traditionally, central and regional powers have always been kept at a distance and do not interfere very much with each other. And “regionalist politics certainly does have a closer relationship with unofficial, traditional architecture.” The conclusion is that Critical Regionalism will most probably install itself within niches created by a unique tradition of regional politics and hopefully begin to face its own past and formulate its own Chinese principles.

AUTHOR



Thorsten Botz-Bornstein
Assistant Professor of Philosophy
Gulf University for Science and Technology, College of Arts
and Sciences Philosophy, Hawally, Kuwait
thorstenbotz@hotmail.com

REFERENCES

- ¹ Hannah Beech: "Ye Olde Shanghai" in *Time* Feb. 14, 2005.
- ² See my article...
- ³ Cf. Catherine Cooke: "Beauty as the Route to the Radiant Future: Response to Soviet Architecture" in *Journal of Design History* 10: 2, 1997, p. 139. Cf. also Don L. Hanlon: "Architectural Education in Post-Maoist China" in *Journal of Architectural Education* 41: 1, 1987, pp. 26-29.
- ⁴ John Czaplicka: "The Vernacular in Place and Time: Relocating History in Post-Soviet Cities" in M. Umbach & B. Hüppauf (eds), *Vernacular Modernism: Heimat, Globalization, and the Built Environment* (Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 173.
- ⁵ The term goes back to the American architect Henry Killiam Murphy (1877-1954) and his efforts to combine national and modernist elements in China.
- ⁶ This had happened about two decades earlier. Cf. Rowe, Peter & Seng Kuan: *Architectural Encounters with Essence and Form in Modern China* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press), p. 134.
- ⁷ Xin Ruan: *New China Architecture* (Hong Kong: Periplus, 2006), p. 14.
- ⁸ Douglas Reichert Powell: *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 19.
- ⁹ See Charlie Q. L. Xue's Chapter "Experimental Architecture: The Rise of the Younger Generation" in *Building a Revolution: Chinese Architecture since 1980*. (Hong Kong University press, 2006) and Li Xiangning's "'Make-the-Most-of-It' Architecture: Young Architects and Chinese Tactics" in *City* 12:2 2008, 226-236.
- ¹⁰ In *Architecture in Greece* 5, 1981.
- ¹¹ "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism" in *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal* 20, 1983, pp. 147-62. In a 2001 article entitled "Place, Form, Cultural Identity" (*Arcade*, Autumn 20, pp. 16-17) he again took up this concept. See also Tzonis and Lefaivre's article "Why Critical Regionalism Today" (*Architecture and Urbanism* 236, 1990, pp. 22-33) and their new book *Critical Regionalism: Architecture and Identity in a Globalized World* (New York: Stout,

2003) and *Tropical Architecture: Critical Regionalism in the Age of Globalization* ed. by Tzonis, Lefavre, and Stagno (Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2001).

¹² Mr. Wang's statements have been collected by me during a conversation in his Hangzhou studio in May 2007. I thank YAN Shaojie who functioned as an interpreted in my conversation with Mr. Wang.

¹³ Tong Jun (1900-1983) studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania from 1925 to 1930 and taught at Nanjing University.

¹⁴ 1999-2000, in cooperation with Lu Wenyu and Tong Ming.

¹⁵ Kenneth Frampton: "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for Architecture of Resistance" in Hal Foster: *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983).

¹⁶ Modernizer Feng Guifen launched the famous self-strengthening movement (1861-95) and produced the slogan of "Chinese learning for fundamental principles; Western learning for use" (*Zhongxue wei ti; xixue wei yong*). Interestingly, the thesis was brought from China to Japan and the Japanese slogan of "Japanese spirit and Western technology" even preexisted in the form of the earlier version "Japanese spirit and Chinese technology."

¹⁷ I am aware that the existence of an enlightenment movement or a scientific revolution has been a point of issue among sinologists for at least thirty years. See Nathan Sivin who writes: "A scientific revolution, by the criteria that historians of science use, did take place in China in the eighteenth century. It did not, however, have the social consequences that we assume a scientific revolution will have." "Why the Scientific Revolution Did Not Take Place in China - Or Did It?" in Sivin, *Science in Ancient China* (Aldershot, Hants: Variorum, 1995), chapter VII. The article is also on Sivin's website. Sivin points out that European science, between the time of Copernicus and Laplace, created a knowledge "that had no value except truth value" and that "the same leap was not taken in seventeenth-century China." This might be true but it says nothing about a subsequent development of a critics of reason that was also absent in China.

¹⁸ Jianfei ZHU: "Criticality in Between China and the West" in *The Journal of Architecture*, 10:5, November 2005, pp. 479-498.

¹⁹ Peter Eisenman: "Critical Architecture in a Geopolitical World" in Cynthia Davidson and Ismail Serageldin (eds). *Architecture Beyond Architecture: Creativity and Social Transformations in Islamic Cultures* (London: Academy Editions, 1995).

²⁰ K. von Moltke: 'Introduction' to Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), p. xv.

²¹ Ranke: *The Secret of World History* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1981), p. 250.

²² I obviously disagree with Keith Eggener and Jane Jacobs who hold that Critical Regionalism "is a revisionary form of imperialist nostalgia that defines the colonial as always engaged in conscious work against the core" (Jane Jacobs: *The Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City*, London Routledge, 1996), p. 14-15. Still, Eggener's point that Critical Regionalism is in most cases no response to the West but rather a response to local circumstances can well be integrated in my own argumentation, as I define CR in the first place as a self-critical movement. I grant that CR might at times have made "paramount a struggle where no struggle otherwise would have been said to exist" ("Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism" in *Journal of Architectural Education* 55:4, 2002, 228-237, 232). However, I would hold that also the non-western critical regionalists participate in the *western* enlightened discourse even when they do not directly act against western (capitalist, globalized) models.

²³ Luke S.K. Kwong: "Chinese Politics on the Crossroads: Reflections on the 100 Days Reform of 1898" in *Modern Asian Studies* 2000, 34:3, p. 663-695, quotation from p. 664.

²⁴ As a matter of fact, some historians hold that reforms had been "unofficially" pushed through once the reformers had been condemned to exile, and even "far surpassed the objectives of the Hundred Day Reform Movement." Cf. Jin Guantao: "Interpreting Modern Chinese History through the Theory of Ultrastable Systems" in Gloria Davis (ed.): *Voicing Concerns: Contemporary Chinese Critical Inquiry* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), p. 164ff.

²⁵ "The Study of Criticism: Three W-sims" in *Xinchao (New Tide)* 2:3 April 1920, pp. 601-603 quoted from Vera Schwarcz: *Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (California UP, 1986), p. 123.

²⁶ Hu Shih: *The Chinese Renaissance: The Haskell Lectures 1933* (New York: Paragon, 1963), p. 76.

²⁷ Simon Leys: *L'humeur, l'honneur, l'horreur* (Paris: Laffont, 1991), p. 11ff.

²⁸ F.W. Mote: "A Millennium of Chinese Urban History: Form, Time and Space Concepts in Soochow". *Rice University Studies* 59:4, 1973, pp. 35-65, quotation from p. 49. The text is mentioned by Leys.

²⁹ Derk Bodde: *Essays on Chinese Civilization* (Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 39.

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari: *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Minuit, 1975), pp. 33-43.

³¹ Benjamin A. Elman: *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Harvard University Press 1984), p. xivff.

³² Miriam Bratu Hansen: "Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Film as Vernacular Modernism" in *Film Quarterly* 54:1, 2000, pp. 10-22.