



Architectural Imaginaries in Chinese *Jiehua*

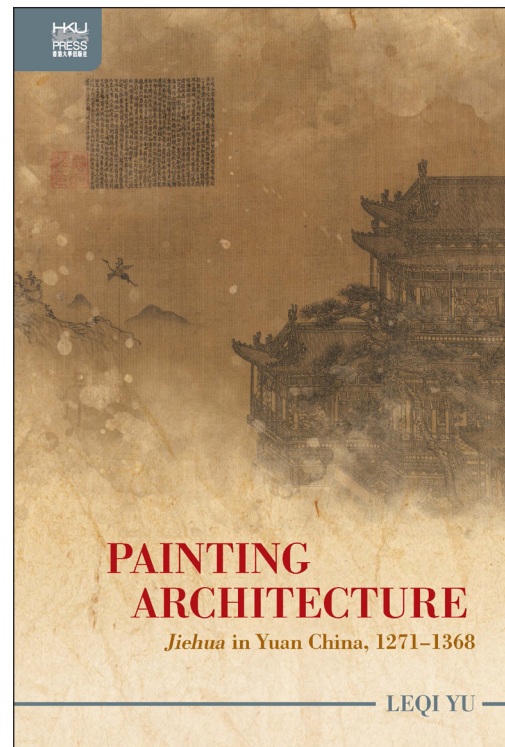
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A review of Leqi Yu, *Painting Architecture: Jiehua in Yuan China, 1271–1368*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2022, 216 pages, 54 halftones, 12 color plates. ISBN: 978-988-8754-23-6. Yu's book on Yuan *jiehua*, a traditional Chinese painting genre centered on architectural subjects and tectonic structures, examines its relationship with real buildings, painters, and politics. This review highlights her discussions on architectural representations, focusing on her accounts of the degree of accuracy in pictorial depictions, utilization of modular systems by painters, and artistic techniques employed to achieve verisimilitude.

Keywords: architectural representation; *jiehua*; Yuan China; painter Xia Yong



Pictorial representations of buildings, alongside design and construction drawings, constitute a valuable visual resource for researching architectural history. The Chinese tradition of *jiehua*, characterized by an elaborate depiction of tectonic structures, craftsmanship, and the use of specialized tools and techniques to create precise lines, provides an important reference. However, it remains open ended whether such practices in the past faithfully captured actual buildings or were shaped by the artists' creative interpretations and imagination. Such lack of certainty also prompts inquiries into how painters conceptualized the built environment and employed their renderings to convey deeper ideas that reflected multifaceted aspects of their time. In her new



book, Leqi Yu brings *jiehua* during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) into the spotlight. While *jiehua* is a context-specific concept that has evolved across the long history of Chinese painting, from this era onwards, ‘the term largely replaced other names of depictions of architectural subjects and man-made objects’ (17). However, Yuan artists’ achievements have received less scholarly attention compared with works from other periods, notably the Song (960–1279) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties. In Yu’s discussions, painter Xia Yong (who was active during the mid-14th century) serves as ‘an entry point and linchpin for understanding the previously understudied aspects of Yuan *jiehua*’ (19). His 15 extant pieces, centered on landmark buildings and the painter’s inscription of the subjects, stand out from those who treat architectural images in a more generic fashion (36).

Chapter 1 delves into the relationship between Xia’s paintings and the buildings and architectural features they potentially represent. Yu begins by examining the ‘dilemma’ arising from two versions of the same composition listed under different titles in respective museum collections, pondering whether their subject is the Yellow Tower, as Su Zhe’s prose poem included in the painting might suggest, or the Yellow Crane Tower, hinted at by the image of a man riding a crane. Given limited source materials regarding the appearance of the former building, in attempting to deduce which building is being represented, Yu primarily relies on comparing Xia’s architectural portrayal with

historical textual descriptions and visual depictions of the latter. Despite its greater fame, however, Yu ultimately rules it out as a possibility. While readers cognizant of this tradition can likely anticipate the outcome, Yu's meticulous scrutiny demonstrates her expertise in the connoisseurship of Chinese painting. Her methodologically exemplary study guides readers through these investigations with clarity and provides an instructive example of assessing paintings with ambiguous attributions.

Yu also examines 'the organization of architectural elements and representation of building components in Xia Yong's art that evoke the modular basis of the Chinese traditional architectural system. She compares different copies of the Yellow Pavilion, Yueyang Pavilion, and Prince Teng Pavilion and notes that Xia placed 'transferable parts', such as the gable roof, verandas, and corridor, into varying combinations (52), which demonstrates he did not, in fact, intend to depict the original structures. Even multiple versions of a single subject, despite being compositionally similar, do not look the same. Rather than depending on the actual scenes, Xia drew inspiration from older paintings, supplemented them with his own, thereby creating models for subsequent *jiehua* painters (54). Yu then discusses detailed depictions of roof components by Xia and other *jiehua* masters during the Song-Yuan periods. She argues that Xia draws on the approaches of the Southern Song (1127-1279) and that his portrayal of roof ridge ornaments reflects a tendency during this period to 'mechanize the painting process' (63). At the same time, changes in the way bracket-set images were depicted from the Northern Song (960-1127) to the Yuan periods, with the former embracing structural clarity, the latter simplification and standardization. These images were informed by actual architectural changes, *jiehua* developed its own system independent of building practices (70). Yu thus suggests that 'it is almost impossible to depend on Xia's *jiehua* to reimagine the real architecture' (71).

Yu emphasizes that painters pursued 'artistic verisimilitude,' if not, visual accuracy (71). Contemporary architectural historians are interested in *jiehua* because they hope it will supply visual evidence that helps us better understand early buildings that no longer exist, but, unfortunately, precise technical interpretations of architectural details are often missing from *jiehua*. However, Yu notes that despite differences in their purposes and audiences, drawings for architectural design, cartography, and *jiehua* shared subjects and graphic techniques (74), including use of a scaled grid system in site plans and mapmaking. She compares representations of landmark buildings in cartography, focusing on spatial relationships, with *jiehua* arguing that the embrace of a consistent point of view in Xia's painting, made possible by developments in the use of perspective during the Southern Song and Yuan periods, makes his rendering of architecture more 'natural' (82). Though Yu's interpretation often relies on established scholarship, she equips readers with the appropriate context for understanding Xia's work.

Chapters 2 and 3, together almost as lengthy as chapter 1, explore other notable masters of Yuan *jiehua*, delving into the painters' network and the influence of Yuan politics. After the collapse of South Song, the Mongol ruler founded a new Chinese dynasty and reunited the country, which presented challenges for Southern literati seeking government positions. Among the highest-ranking Southerners was Wang Zhenpeng, a revered court painter appointed by the Emperor Renzong and whose work Yu introduces as an example of the precursor of the *baimiao* (plain drawing) style. Although there is no evidence of direct interactions between Wang and Xia, Yu suggests that Xia inherited Wang's fine-line ink monochrome technique. She also shows how the Yuan *jiahua* painters were a collective and documents their 'chronological and regional characterization' (19), noting the influence of the Li-Guo tradition of barren, rocky, and monumental landscapes from the Northern Song period on mid-Yuan court paintings and the emergence of late Yuan literati painting styles among professional artists in Jiangnan, South China, known for their depiction of softer scenery. Yu also highlights the political role the *jiehua* style played, showing how the Yuan emperors' keen interest in complex construction projects and well-crafted objects that symbolized the empire's immense wealth served as a catalyst for the production of *jiehua*. This dynamic encouraged Chinese literati to adapt their painting styles to align with imperial tastes, a practice that shaped mainstream perceptions of the genre. According to Yu, the interpretation of *jiehua* by scholar-gentlemen in the Yuan court embodied 'Confucian ideals of statecraft' (122) represented by a sage ruler who heeded his advisors' counsel and demonstrated concern for the welfare of the people. This connection underscores how the imperial patronage of artistic practices served to bolster the authority and legitimacy of the Mongol dynasty.

In the conclusion, Yu, upon reexamining the calligraphic inscriptions, image elements, and the format of Xia's paintings, posits that Xia's *jiehua* were crafted in atelier workshops and catered to education clerks and lower-ranking literati in the Jiangnan market while also noting their dissemination to Japan, information that 'provid[es] a fuller picture of the East Asian world in the fourteenth century' (135). According to the author, the local clientele, though not of high rank, identified themselves as lofty scholars. Xia's exclusive use of 'grandiose Chinese palace structures' derived from literary sources from the Han-ruled Tang (618–907) and Song dynasties, responded to a growing 'Chinese confidence' during the late Yuan period (131–132). Yu contends that Xia, who hailed from the Southern Song capital, echoed concerns about the Yuan government's negligence in recognizing talent and addressing the populace's welfare while subtly embedding political commentary within his paintings.

For readers interested in the history of the built environment in China, Yu's book provides insights into architectural imaginaries in Yuan *jiehua* and serves to remind architectural historians to assess critically the painting genre as visual research material. While these depictions may not always accurately reflect stylistic and construction realities — especially since none of Xia's subjects were built in his era — they encourage interdisciplinary research that integrates Chinese painting conventions, artistic approaches, and cultural and symbolic implications of architectural motifs within specific social and political contexts. Yu's rigorous analysis is supported by admirable English translations of extensive segments of original Chinese texts, images presented in an engaging format, and informative references. Her comprehensive exploration of historical interpretations and contemporary scholarship on *jiehua* makes this publication an essential read for future studies on architectural representation in the Chinese tradition.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

