

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Political Ideology and the Production of Architectural Theories in Mao's China (1949–1976)

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This paper reveals a missing thread in the global historiography of architectural theory by scrutinizing the relationship between political ideology and architectural discourse in Mao's China (1949–76). Several critical moments in this era, during which new theories or concepts emerged, deserve close study: 1) the National Style in 1954; 2) the official design principle, 'appropriateness, economy, and if possible, beauty' in 1955; 3) the Socialist New Style in 1959; 4) the Design Revolution in 1964; and 5) the 'new architecture' in 1973. The political context and the role of state ideology are discussed with regard to the relevant texts, buildings, architects and design institutes.

Discussion focuses on the mode of theoretical production in the Mao era, which is summarized as a relation between 'container' and 'content'. The broad and abstract theories of the time are conceptual containers that failed to define specific contents. Architectural autonomy continued to exist in the form of knowledge accumulation, especially the absorption of modernism, even though state ideology and political movements dominated architectural discourse.

Introduction

China in the era of Mao (1949–1976) was characterized by a series of political movements and by intense ideological propaganda. The political ideology of the state was raised to the highest level, dominating every sphere of social, economic and intellectual life, including architectural discourse. Few independent and critical theories were proposed by individuals, unlike in the West. But theories, as manifested in government policies, propaganda, statements and regulations, were nevertheless productive. These mostly normative and prescriptive theories were about how architecture should be developed. They were based on a collective notion concerning both anonymous, mass-produced buildings and iconic buildings designed through 'collective creation'.¹

This paper analyzes the content and background of architectural theories in the Mao era, by focusing on how the political ideology of the state was translated into architectural terms and how architectural theories were produced in certain political and institutional contexts. This paper first discusses the political ideology of the period and the role of the state, and then looks into several key moments in the development and evolution of architectural theories in Mao's China. Finally, it discusses the mode of theoretical production in this era.

Political Ideology and the Role of the State in Mao's China

Mao's China was often proclaimed as the 'new China'. According to the Marxist rhetoric prevalent in the Mao era, after 1949 China entered a period of socialism, the

prelude to communism, a time in which China became fundamentally different from the semi-colonized, semi-feudal and semi-capitalist 'old China'. Despite this radical break with previous history, some contemporary scholars, including Wang Hui (2011: 63–94), argue that the Mao era should be seen as a continuation of the previous history of Chinese civilization and that its premises were a complex hybrid of ideologies and political traditions that originated in both the Chinese historical experience and Western modernity.

From the late 19th century onwards, China's modern history foregrounds three political discourses: nationalism, socialism and modernization. Chinese (Han ethnic majority) nationalism gradually intensified in waves of revolutions and struggles against both the ethnically Manchu Qing dynasty and foreign colonizers. The nationalists established the Republic of China after the Qing dynasty was toppled by the Xinhai Revolution in 1911. Parallel to the development of nationalist movements in the early 20th century, socialism and Marxism, originating in the West, were introduced into China through the mediation of Japan (Zhong and Wang 1998: 19–27). Marxism gradually stimulated class consciousness among the Chinese people and became the rallying point for a group of leftist intellectuals. Following the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the birth of the Soviet Union as the first communist country, Leninism was introduced into China and provided a new direction for the country. In Leninism, the Communist Party is conceptualized as related to the proletariat by being the revolutionary vanguard. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was formed to adapt Marxism-Leninism to the Chinese context by uniting workers, peasants and leftist intellectuals to fight against the imperialist powers (Knight 2007). Modernization, the third discourse,

had continued to be an aspiration since 1840, when the Qing government was defeated by the technologically advanced West. Before 1949, in the semi-colonial context in, for example, Shanghai, the concept of modernization was inextricably associated ideologically with capitalism.

These three overarching political discourses, which emerged in the late 19th century, all extended into the Mao era to constitute the political ideology of Mao's China. During this era, these discourses acquired new meanings. Nationalism was promoted to enhance the identity of the new socialist country. Marxism-Leninism was further disseminated through propaganda and mass movements to consolidate the party's control over all of society. The concept of modernization, often embodied in the slogan 'Four Modernizations' (industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national defense), was deprived of its ideological association with capitalism and began to be understood from a technical perspective, similar to the concept of industrialization (Yu 2013: 165).

If we view state leadership as part of a long history of growing strength dating to the late 19th century, it reached a climax under Mao. Although state leadership grew stronger in both communist and capitalist countries due to intensifying ideological confrontation during the Cold War, the leading role of the state in Mao's China was more rooted in the Chinese Confucian tradition and imported Marxist-Leninist ideology. According to the Confucian ideal, the state should occupy a central position in an all-inclusive, deep, asymmetrical, hierarchical social order that encompasses multiple scales, including the individual, the family, the state and the world (Zhu 2014). The Chinese people historically looked to the authority and moral leadership of the state because these were considered essential for the peace and unity of the country. In Marxist-Leninist ideology, the Communist Party was regarded as the revolutionary vanguard and the single core of state leadership. The state, which according to Marx's theory served as an oppressive organ for the ruling class, served the proletariat by ensuring the role of dictatorship (Harding 1996). Under Mao, the CCP controlled the state apparatus absolutely and strengthened state power through a series of mass movements and through continuous class struggle against the bourgeoisie.

Architectural Discourse in Mao's China

Architecture as an independent discipline was a modern construction in China with distinctive Western and Japanese influence. In the 1900s, the late Qing period, architecture as an engineering discipline was introduced into the curriculum of the Imperial University of Peking (founded in 1898) based on the Japanese model (Xu 2010: 231–237). In the 1920s and 1930s, the first generation of Chinese architects, mostly educated in the US, returned to China and established private architectural firms. They brought back both Beaux-Arts tradition and modernism as two different systems of architectural knowledge.

In Mao's China, the entire architectural profession was collectivized and nationalized. The state exerted absolute and pervasive control over various institutions, including design institutes, universities, academic journals and

professional societies. The practice of architectural design and knowledge production was almost entirely based on such institutions as the Beijing Industrial Design Institute (BIDI) and Beijing Institute of Architectural Design (BIAD), which were owned by the state, managed by government officials, and directly framed by the national policies, political movements and ideological needs of the time. State authority was represented by various agencies, ranging from Mao himself and other political leaders to those individual architects who were empowered to interpret official architectural theories.

The three political discourses, namely, socialism, nationalism and modernization, all penetrated deeply into the realm of architecture, and crystalized as three architectural concepts: 'socialist realism', 'national form', and 'modern architecture'. The slogan Socialist Realism as an overarching theoretical term was confirmed as a general line for architectural design from the 1950s. It was believed to perfectly match Marxism-Leninism and Chinese reality; but the specific definition was not always clear. This concept signified different architectural approaches at different times, from the most monotonous functionalism to the many eclectic styles of the Beaux-Arts tradition, including the Soviet-inspired National Style. Similarly, the meanings of 'national form' and 'modern architecture' also shifted from time to time. In general, theoretical concepts of the period were broad and vague; they could be considered as a series of conceptual 'containers' whose 'contents' were undetermined and shifted over time.

The political ideology of the state and the architectural discourse were closely tied, and both evolved throughout the Mao era. Their historical development could be summarized in three periods: the formative 1950s, the radical 1960s and the pragmatic 1970s. In the 1950s, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was newly founded, the rising consciousness of nationality, fierce class struggle, economic scarcity and limited construction experience all led to the diversification of thought and discourse, characterized by a struggle between modernism and the National Style. In the 1960s, when political ideology shifted to a leftist extreme during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1965) and at the height of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1969), architectural discourse gradually became mere political discourse. Architectural theory could scarcely be differentiated from radical leftist propaganda. Architectural practice was also 'revolutionized' by increasing the speed of construction, reducing costs and promoting class struggle among architects. In the 1970s, new buildings based on a modernist architectural language were first built in Beijing and Guangzhou for the increasing foreign affairs, which drew international attention and stimulated a wave of reports on the 'new architecture' in China. This 'new architecture' later spread across the country, becoming the prevailing style of the 1970s.

Although the architectural theories of the 1950s have been much studied (Rowe and Kuan 2002; Ji 2007; Zhu 2009; Wang and Wang 2014), those of the 1960s and 1970s were often neglected. In particular, the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) was often regarded as a 'vacuum of architectural theory' (Li 2014). This was

largely due to the narrow definition of 'architectural theories' as the thoughts of individual architects, and also to ignorance of the theoretical values embedded in both the words and practice of this period. In fact, in the 1960s and the 1970s, a large number of new concepts were created, as manifested in ideological propaganda, government policies, journal editorials and architects' words. Also, the absence of theoretical discussion on 1970s modernism, in contrast to thriving modernist practices, deserves further analysis, particularly in the specific political context.

To trace the development of architectural theories in relation to the evolving socio-political contexts, we need to focus on several critical events, including the related political ideology and architectural theories, along with texts, buildings and architects: 1) the creation of the National Style in 1954; 2) the establishment of the official design principle of 'appropriateness, economy, and if possible, beauty' in 1955; 3) the proposal of the Socialist New Style in 1959; 4) the launch of the Design Revolution in 1964; and 5) the emergence of 'new architecture' in 1973.

For this historical analysis of theories during the time of Mao, *Jianzhu Xuebao* [Architectural Journal] is the primary source, with the most important evidence. As the official journal of the Architectural Society of China, it was one of the earliest and most influential architectural journals in China. It functioned as both a forum for architects and a propaganda apparatus for the state in the Mao era. It could be seen as a discursive link between politics and architecture, reflecting the dynamic relations between the two. Other sources, however, help to provide a more comprehensive picture of both the political context and architects' personal experiences.

The Creation of the National Style, 1954

In the early 1950s, the formulas of Socialist Realism and 'Socialist Content, National Form', both proposed by Joseph Stalin to guide Soviet art and literature, were systematically introduced into China and applied to architecture.² In the first issue of *Jianzhu Xuebao*, published in 1954, a theoretical article by Georgi Minervin (1954) was translated from Russian to Chinese to clarify Soviet architectural concepts and theories. Minervin argued that Socialist Realism was a logical result of Lenin's aesthetic theory and the only correct line under socialist ideology. Lenin's 'reflectivism', which was based on the epistemology of Marxist materialism, required the artists to adopt a realist approach – to observe, reflect and epitomize reality, so that the 'form' of the artwork could reflect the 'content' of socialism. Art had an ideological function, Minervin said: to educate the people and serve society. The author also stressed the class nature of art, which was the foundation of Marxist aesthetics as laid down by Lenin and Stalin. Art in a socialist country therefore had to serve the proletariat and the needs of the Communist Party as a revolutionary vanguard. This idea was also emphasized by Mao Zedong in the Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art given after the Yan'an Rectification Movement in 1942. From then on, 'art serves politics' became a principle of art creation in Mao's China.

In this article, architecture was confirmed to have dual dimensions: aesthetic and practical. Therefore, Socialist Realism as first proposed in art theory was completely compatible with architecture. The task of architectural art was to reflect the magnitude of socialist construction and to educate the people. Minervin asked architects to avoid the various 'formalisms' of capitalism and instead to enhance design skills so as to create 'sensible forms' that are 'conspicuous' and 'beautiful' in design practice.

Another article in the same issue, by Wang Ying (1954), discussed theoretical positions related to the slogan Socialist Content, National Form. He argued that every country and society was rooted in a national tradition. To reflect the reality of a society and cultivate love for the nation, architecture should adopt a 'national form'. Wang also stressed that national form should be united with 'socialist content', as required by Socialist Realism. Then he proceeded to demonstrate the merits of Chinese classical architecture, for example the elegant shape of roofs. He, too, concluded that architects should develop their skills, in particular to express national form using Chinese traditional architecture as a primary reference.

Liang Sicheng, the first editor-in-chief of *Jianzhu Xuebao* and dean of the School of Architecture at Tsinghua University, endeavoured to incorporate his historical research on traditional Chinese architecture into the formation of a National Style in line with Socialist Realism (Zhu 2009: 75–104). In the first issue of *Jianzhu Xuebao*, Liang Sicheng (1954) published an article called 'The Characteristics of Chinese Architecture', in an attempt to define the Chinese national form. In this article, he summarized nine characteristics of Chinese architecture, with an emphasis on the structural composition of classical architecture. Then he proposed the idea of 'syntax' and 'translatability', suggesting that classical Chinese architecture could be translated into a new National Style by combining classical syntax (composition) with new materials and forms. In practice, Liang's National Style was characterized by a classical composition of three segments: base, body and roof. His idea was demonstrated by the Friendship Hotel designed by Zhang Bo at the Beijing Institute of Architectural Design (BIAD) (**Figure 1**).

As the vice-president of the Capital Planning Committee, Liang strongly promoted the National Style. It was said that he required all government buildings along the Chang'an Avenue to adopt the three-segment composition with a 'big roof'. This rigid compositional framework prevented architects from exploring new possibilities to design with national form, which caused some architects to resent the National Style – and Liang himself (Wang 1980: 2).

Parallel to the National Style being established as an official architectural approach, Western modernism was denounced as so-called 'formalism' and 'structuralism' (Wang 1954).³ These two terms alluded to the architecture of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, respectively. The second issue of *Jianzhu Xuebao* in 1954 made a comparison between East and West Germany, and by doing so, assigned to architecture the oversimplified ideological labels of either socialism or capitalism. Modernism was thus unjustly considered as serving only the capitalist

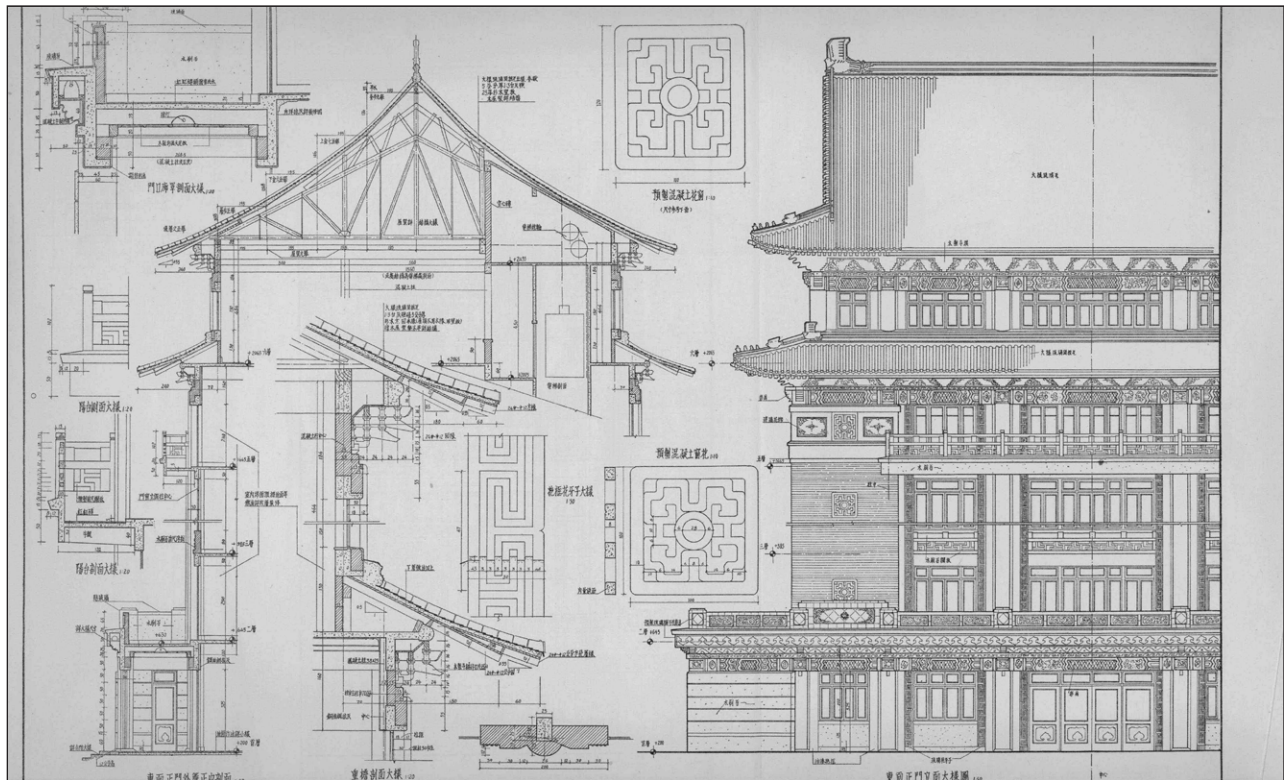


Figure 1: Friendship Hotel in Beijing, 1954. Architect: Zhang Bo. Reprinted from *Jianzhu Xuebao*, 1954(1): 47.

class and being detached from the needs of the working class. The journal also intentionally published a letter, in the name of the people, criticizing the modernist buildings newly built in Guangzhou as ugly ‘boxes’ (Lin 1954).

The Principle of Architectural Design, 1955

In late 1954, architectural discourse in China abruptly made an about-face, due to a sudden shift in international politics. At the All-Union Conference of Construction Workers in 1954, Nikita Khrushchev strongly criticized the Academy of Architecture of the USSR for their one-sided emphasis on aesthetics and appearance that led to huge waste in construction. Following this, in 1955, the Chinese premier, Zhou Enlai, also criticized the economic waste of the prevalent ‘big roofs’ in National Style architecture in a government report, and an anti-waste movement was then launched (Zou 2001: 198–200).

In 1955, a series of criticisms targeting the National Style and its advocates, including Liang Sicheng, was published in the three issues of *Jianzhu Xuebao*.⁴ Zhai Lilin (1955), a teacher at the Department of Civil Engineering, Tongji University, criticized the theory of Liang Sicheng by arguing that beauty should be subordinate, and functionality should be the priority for architecture. Architectural aesthetics should be closely related to its functional use. By quoting the principle of Marxist dialectical materialism, ‘content determines form’, he emphasized the correctness of Socialist Realism and the necessity of socialist content and argued that as national form belonged to the category of form and aesthetics, it was not a primary concern. He further questioned whether national form could always fit socialist content, especially the national form that caused huge waste. To find a proper national form

reflecting socialist content, he expanded the concept of national form to include not only classical architecture, as discussed by Liang Sicheng and Wang Ying in 1954, but also the diverse vernacular architecture inhabited by ordinary people in various parts of China. Zhai’s article was important because it broke the association between Socialist Realism and the National Style which had been established by Liang. Another article by Liu Dunzhen (1955), a renowned historian at Nanjing Institute of Technology, further criticized Liang’s research methodology as ‘capitalist idealism’ rather than Marxist materialism, saying Liang only studied the evolution of typical architectural form but neglected socio-political forces and other realistic factors that shaped architecture.

In the anti-waste movement, a formula of ‘appropriateness, economy, and if possible, beauty’ (the Principle) was re-emphasized and confirmed as the general principle to guide architectural design in the Mao era. A similar formula was proposed as early as the first National Conference of Construction in July 1952: ‘the design should emphasize the principle of “suitability, safety, and economy;” and when the economic conditions permit, pay certain attention to the beauty of buildings’ (Zou 2001: 208–210).

Later, in 1959, Liang Sicheng further interpreted the Principle as a great innovation in architectural theory (Liang 1959). Liang pointed out that the Principle was adapted from the classical architectural formula of ‘commodity, firmness, delight’, first proposed by Vitruvius but differing fundamentally in its emphasis on the class nature of architecture. The requirements of economy and appropriateness were meant to serve the lives of all people, instead of the degenerate lives of the ruling class. In

relation to the dichotomy of content and form, Liang said, appropriateness achieved under conditions of economy was 'content', and beauty was people's feeling of desirable architectural 'form'. Liang also emphasized that beauty was not a direct result of appropriateness and economy; instead, it was an aspect architects needed to pay attention to, under conditions of economy and appropriateness.

The Principle reconfirmed the pragmatic side of architecture as primary, and positioned the aesthetic side as secondary. Its purpose was to make architecture suitable for quickly executed, large-scale construction under conditions of economic scarcity. In 1955, the focus of *Jianzhu Xuebao* shifted from aesthetic and theoretical discussion to technical and practical issues such as social housing, industrial buildings and urban neighbourhood planning.

The Principle as a sustaining architectural policy exerted a significant impact on architectural practices of the Mao era. The emphasis on appropriateness and economy in effect conformed to the functionalist principles of modernism, but the difference lay in attitudes towards aesthetics. In the Principle, aesthetics was considered secondary, removed from the two factors of economy and appropriateness; but modernist aesthetics, understood in a Western context, was often associated with the functionality and economic use of material and not always regarded as 'secondary'. The previous attacks on 'functionalism' and 'structuralism' around 1954, along with the establishment of the Principle, actually mystified the concept of aesthetics, rendering it as a secondary spiritual demand after the primary one of functionality. This prevented Chinese architects from approaching aesthetic issues from the perspectives of functionality, structure and material. But

exceptions persisted in marginal practice. For example, the Wood Comprehensive Utilization Exhibition Hall in Beijing, designed by Lin Leyi in 1958, demonstrated an interest in exploring modernist aesthetics through the expression of structure and materials, reminiscent of Mies' expression of tectonic details (Lin 1960) (**Figure 2**).

Socialist New Style, 1959

The years from 1956 to 1957 saw a dramatic shift from an opening up of architectural discussion to sudden suppression. Triggered by Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956, Mao not only criticized Soviet 'revisionism', but also launched the Hundred Flowers movement to encourage intellectuals to rectify the Party's mistakes in state leadership. But in the summer of 1957, criticism evolved out of control and began to target the Party's political legitimacy. This led to a dramatic crackdown on the Hundred Flowers movement and the launch of the Anti-Rightist campaign. The sharp policy turn caused a deterioration of relations between the intellectuals and the state. Mao even reached the conclusion that intellectuals were still against the Party and socialism (Goldman 1987).

In 1956, following the Hundred Flowers policy, *Jianzhu Xuebao* published a series of architectural discussions and brought up many new theoretical issues. Chen Zhihua and Ying Rucong (1956) commented on Zhai Lilin's theory and criticized his self-contradictory discussion of architectural theory relying on broad Marxist terms. This in fact suggested the autonomy of architecture as a discipline. Dong Dayou (1956) openly advocated free discussion, a global perspective and individual thinking. Yang Tingbao (1956) discussed the decision-making mechanism in the

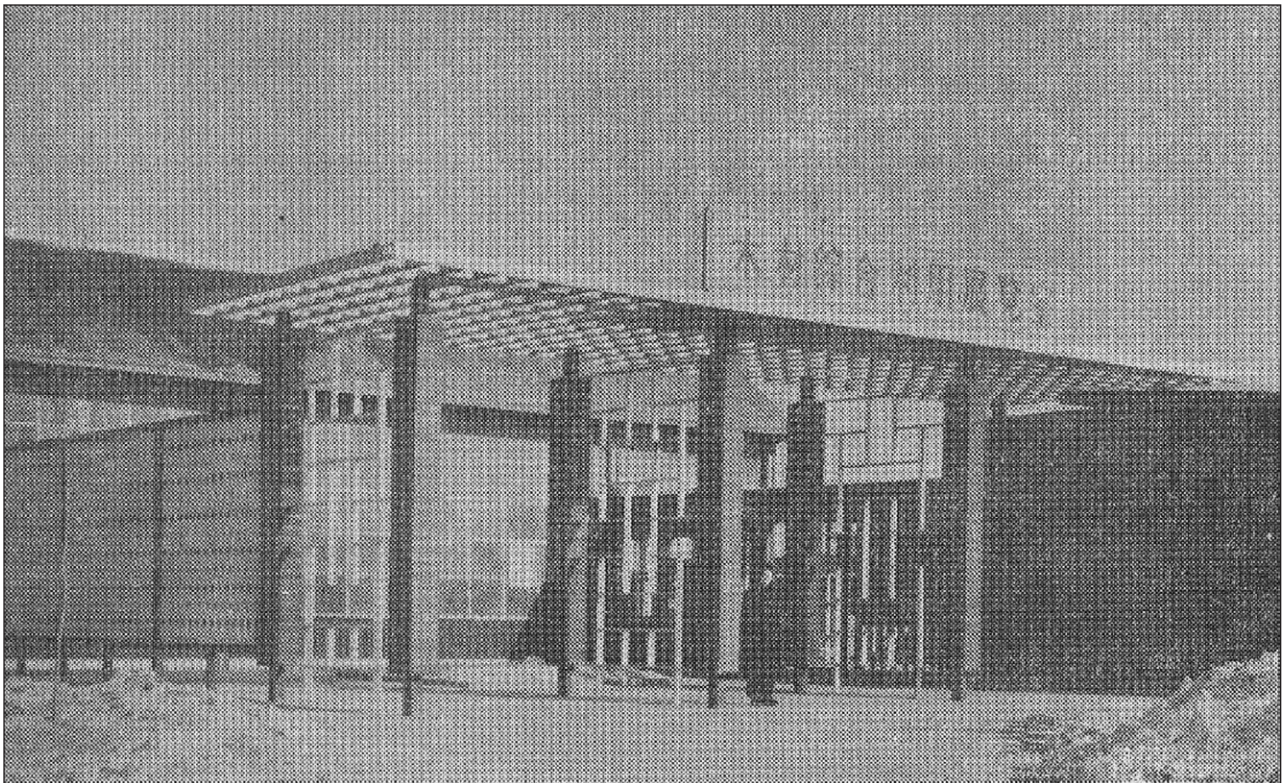


Figure 2: Wood Comprehensive Utilization Exhibition Hall, Beijing. Architect: Lin Leyi. Reprinted from *Jianzhu Xuebao*, 1960(2): 38.

process of collective creation in design institutes and suggested a principle of 'democratic centralism', to balance the two extremes of individualism and collectivism. Democratic centralism was first proposed by Lenin as a set of principles for organizing the Communist Party. By emphasizing this term in architecture, Yang was actually promoting the individual authorship of architecture. Yang said the promotion of individual authorship could not only stimulate the enthusiasm of architects but also enhance their sense of responsibility.

'Modern architecture' became a central focus in the discussions and debates of this period. In 1956, a Polish delegation of architects visiting China was invited by the Architectural Society of China to clarify several confusing questions for Chinese architects regarding 'modern architecture', including 'what is modern architecture' (Wu, Wu and Zhou 1956). The Polish architects first criticized the idea of bringing ideological confrontation into the field of architecture, because this idea had led to ignorance of architectural progress in capitalist countries. They confirmed that 'modern architecture' was a correct architectural approach that conformed to the line of Socialist Realism. It embodied a set of values including economy, technological progress, logical composition, clear purpose and simplicity. 'Modern architecture' could not be easily defined by formalistic dogma, but instead, architects needed to accumulate technical and professional knowledge and develop a broad interest in people's way of life to further develop 'modern architecture'. The Polish architects highly praised two local examples in Beijing, namely, Beijing Children's Hospital, designed by Hua Lanhong, and the Beijing Peace Hotel, designed by Yang Tingbao (Wu, Wu and Zhou 1956).

The Polish architects' articles stimulated a wave of discourse promoting 'modern architecture'. Zhou Buyi at Tsinghua University and Luo Weidong at Tongji University, among others, published a series of articles in *Jianzhu Xuebao* introducing modernist masters, including Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius. Jiang Weihong and Jin Zhiqiang (1956), two students at Tsinghua, published a manifesto 'We Want Modern Architecture'. It was the first and only article in the Mao era explicitly arguing for 'modern architecture'. In this article, it was extolled as the *Zeitgeist* and the architecture of socialism – socialism does not necessarily mean the different forms of houses or cars but rather requires the equality for everyone to own houses and cars. This argument was obviously inspired by Corbusier.

But in late 1957, after the Anti-Rightist campaign was launched, *Jianzhu Xuebao* moved quickly to suppress free discussion. Hua Lanhong and Chen Zhanxiang, two talented architects at BIAD, were denounced as two 'rightists' in the ninth issue of 1957, because of their previous criticism of Beijing's urban construction. More seriously than in 1954, architects, including Zhou Buyi and two students at Tsinghua University, who had once expressed support for modernism were not only seriously criticized, but also seriously persecuted. This caused even more confusion among architects about what the correct architectural approach for socialism should be.

This movement marked the end of the flourishing theoretical debate that began in 1954. In the years 1954 to 1957, the rhythm of restraint and relaxation of architectural discussion kept pace with the rhythm of political shifts and oscillations. In fact, the slogans of Socialist Realism and Socialist Content, National Form did not change, but the understanding and interpretation of them varied from time to time. The 'correct' architectural approach shifted from National Style to 'modern architecture', then to denial of both. The Anti-Rightist campaign totally frustrated and confused Chinese architects. After it, architects became more timid and tentative in both practice and theoretical discussions.

But in 1959, new tasks awaited architects – in particular, the Ten Great Buildings in Beijing for the tenth anniversary of the PRC, including the Great Hall of the People. *Jianzhu Xuebao* published a series of articles to discuss the possibility of a new architectural style that better conformed to Socialist Realism. In 1959, Yuan Jingshen (1959), an architect at BIAD, published an article encouraging architects to design a style that was both Chinese and new, based on the Principle.

In May 1959, Liu Xiufeng, the Minister of Construction, organized a national conference to discuss 'residential standards and architectural art' in Shanghai. At this conference, the creation of a new style for socialist construction became the central issue. The conference began with several academic reports by scholars from Tongji University who reviewed architectural developments in the Soviet Union (by Ge Ruliang), other socialist countries (by Feng Jizhong), and capitalist countries (by Luo Xiaowei). Liu Xiufeng (1959) gave a speech entitled 'Creating Chinese Socialist New Style of Architecture', which was later published in a special issue of *Jianzhu Xuebao* for the tenth anniversary of the PRC (**Figure 3**). His speech once again clarified some basic theoretical concepts from a Marxist perspective, including beauty, architectural art, content and form. He then proposed a new concept, Socialist New Style, as the future direction for architecture. The Socialist New Style in effect encouraged architects to absorb the virtues of different architectures, including the old, the new, the Chinese and the foreign (*gu, jin, zhong, wai*). In response to Liu's speech, Ha Xiongwen (1959), a professor at Tongji University, re-emphasized the necessity of adopting a global view to study international architectural developments. Ha criticized the various modernist trends, exemplified by Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe and Marcel Breuer, as various kinds of 'formalisms', but advocated absorbing the progressive aspects of architecture in capitalist countries, especially new forms reflecting new materials, new technologies and new structure.

This wave of theoretical discussion extended into the early 1960s, thanks to the relatively open political atmosphere during this period. The discussions concentrated on the theme of developing local style in different regions. For example, Lin Keming (1961) proposed a 'Southern Architectural Style' for southern cities like Guangzhou.

Generally, there were few theoretical articles about Western modernism even after Liu Xiufeng encouraged

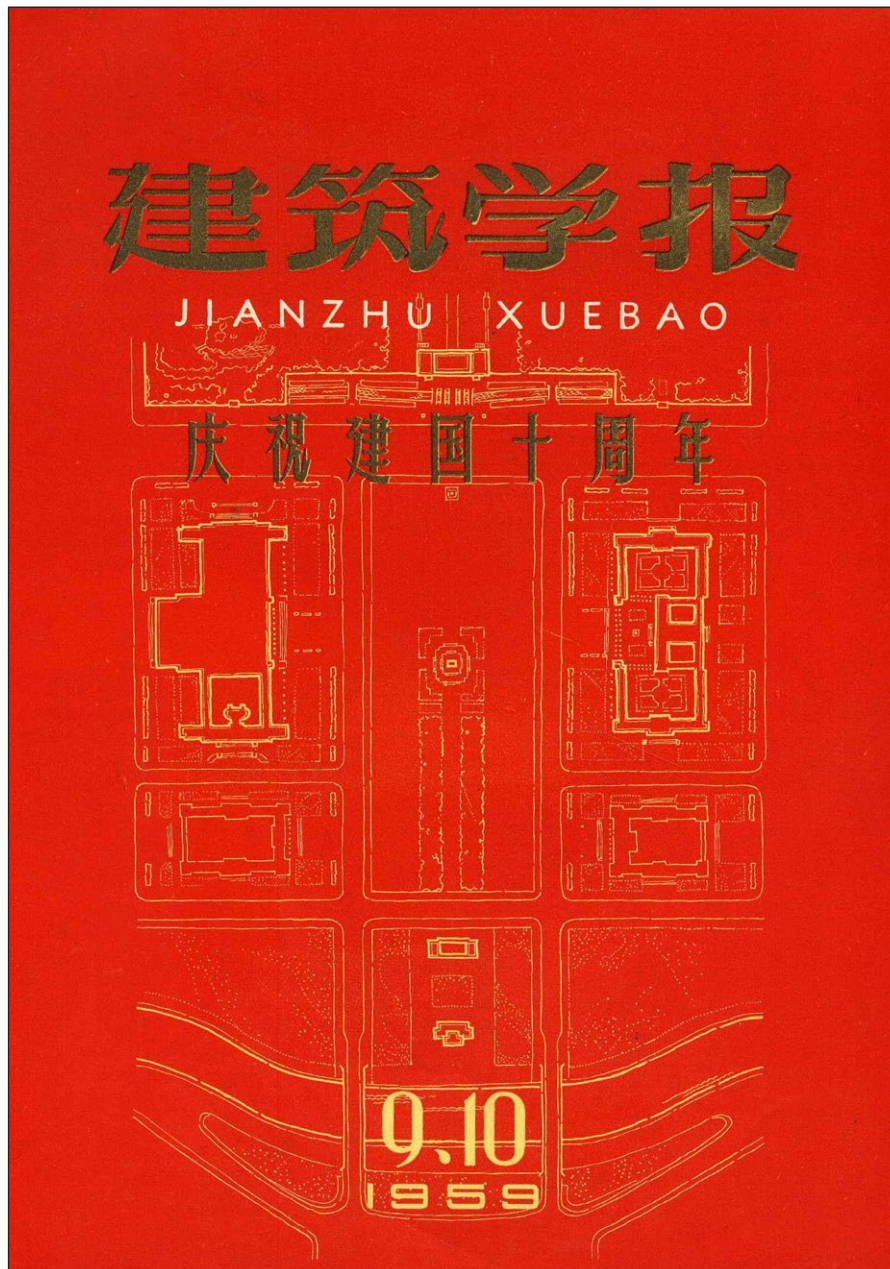


Figure 3: The Special Issue for the Tenth Anniversary of the PRC. Reprinted from *Jianzhu Xuebao*, 1959(9–10): front cover.

learning from the 'foreign' in 1959. As an exception, Gu Qiyuan (1962) systematically and critically re-evaluated 'modern architecture' in the capitalist countries from a Marxist viewpoint. He differentiated pre- and post-war modernism by praising the socialist nature of the former embodied in social housing and denouncing post-war modernism as purely the 'formalism' of degenerate late capitalism. In fact, this article explained the ideological reason why Chinese architects' knowledge of Western modernism was largely restricted to pre-war modernism.

Design Revolution, 1964

Parallel with the promotion of Socialist New Style and the introduction of global modernism, the Great Leap Forward (GLF), from 1958 to 1965, also had a significant impact on architectural discourse and practice. Both radi-

cal economic policy and leftist ideology were pushed to extremes during the GLF. In architectural design, speed and economy of construction were emphasized as the pressing and primary factors. In 1958, *Renmin Ribao* (the People's Daily) published an article criticizing a conservative design approach that caused waste in architectural design and construction (Editorial 1958). Slogans such as 'Technological Renovation and Revolution', and 'more, faster, better, and more economical' (*duo, kuai, hao, sheng*) were proposed for the aim to 'rush into communism'. At the same time, the emphasis on class struggle also came to dominate architectural discourse. For example, an article in the 1958 volume of *Jianzhu Xuebao* discussed the 'two-line struggle' between socialism and capitalism in the architectural education of Tsinghua University and criticized 'capitalist' teachers and their teaching methods (Yue 1958).

From 1959 to 1961, GLF policies caused a serious economic downturn and widespread famine across China, so around 1961, pragmatic leaders such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were temporarily empowered by Mao to lead the restoration of the economy. After the wave of large projects for the tenth anniversary in 1959, no more major projects were proposed, from 1961 onwards. In this period, *Jianzhu Xuebao* almost abolished the discussion of architectural theory and focused instead on economic and technical issues such as low-cost standardized housing.

In 1964, the Design Revolution was carried out in the context of Third Front construction.⁵ Architects were required to increase the speed of construction, reduce construction costs and lower building standards. Gu Mu, the director of the State Capital Committee of Construction, was assigned by Mao to supervise the implementation of this movement. In June 1965, Gu gave a report on the National Survey and Design Conference. He particularly indicated that this movement should neither attack individual architects in design institutes nor classify them into classes (Editors 1992). The Design Revolution was first carried out in the central design institutes, and later expanded into lower-level design institutes. Architects were asked to criticize each other for the 'high, big, exotic, and old' (*gao, da, yang, gu*) style of design.⁶ They were also asked to leave their office buildings to design on the construction site and to join the 'three-in-one combination' of cadres, specialists and workers (Editors 1974; Editors

1975).⁷ Vernacular and low-cost building techniques, such as the so-called *gandalei* (rammed-earth) technique, were encouraged. But in practice, the movement went far beyond these, turning into a far-leftist political movement with class struggle at the centre, particularly after Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Many renowned architects, including Liang Sicheng, became the targets of class struggle and died in this movement (Fairbank 2009: 176-90). Others were sent from capital cities to remote regions. Some central design institutes were even entirely eliminated, including the largest and most significant, the BIDI. In the late 1960s, economic activities including urban construction were actually halted.

Jianzhu Xuebao was closed down in 1965, to resume in 1966. In the first editorial of 1966, the editors self-criticized the previous problems as being 'detached from politics, reality and people'. Previous discussions and reports on architectural art, traditional architecture and gardens and foreign architecture were all criticized for being against the values of self-reliance, hardship and thrift that were emphasized by the party's General Line for Socialist Construction (Editors 1966). The editors vowed to be 'revolutionized', by incorporating Mao's thought and class struggle into architecture. In subsequent issues, political propaganda about the Design Revolution and articles introducing low-cost building techniques were published (Figure 4). Among the few theoretical discussions, a government writer, Wu Xingyuan (1966), proposed a radical



Figure 4: Low-cost Construction in the Design Revolution. Reprinted from *Jianzhu Xuebao*, 1966(3): 33.

idea to push the definition of architecture to an egalitarian and utilitarian extreme. He argued that architectural art is only about the beauty of architectural form and should be deprived of any associations with function and structure. Art and beauty should be eliminated in everyday construction and limited to a few significant 'political and monumental' buildings. Even the concept of function was criticized as misleading, because in the name of function, architects tended to adopt high building standards, which would inevitably increase construction costs. Under this theory, architectural discourse was largely reduced to the propaganda of architectural policies and standards.

After the Cultural Revolution began, *Jianzhu Xuebao* was denounced as a base for 'capitalist professionals and authorities' by the Party leaders of the Ministry of Construction (Peng 2014). Starting with the sixth issue of 1966, the previous editorial team was replaced by a new one. But after this issue, *Jianzhu Xuebao* stopped entirely. The sixth issue of 1966 was dominated by political announcements about the launch of the Cultural Revolution. The cover of this issue featured a portrait of Mao (Figure 5). A series of articles was published to criticize the former minister of construction, Liu Xiufeng, and

his Socialist New Style. Liu's 'crimes' included referring to Soviet architectural policy and theory and promoting traditional and foreign architecture.

'New Architecture' during the Cultural Revolution, 1973

The turmoil of the Cultural Revolution almost paralyzed the economic and political system of the whole country. In the 1970s, Mao began to reflect on policy mistakes, especially after Lin Biao's death in 1971.⁸ Radical leftist ideology began to be balanced by a growing pragmatic spirit, as a result of a factional struggle at the highest level of state politics under Mao's mediation. His wife, Jiang Qing, continued to control the state apparatus of propaganda and to promote leftist ideology; the premier, Zhou Enlai, began to take charge of economic and foreign affairs, adopting a pragmatic approach. In the early 1970s, China's diplomatic relations with the United States and other Western countries achieved a significant breakthrough, culminating in Nixon's visit to China in 1972. The major architectural institutions that had been dismissed in the late 1960s were gradually re-established to undertake newly started building projects.



Figure 5: The Sixth Issue of *Jianzhu Xuebao*, featuring Mao's portrait. Reprinted from *Jianzhu Xuebao*, 1966(6): front cover.

In the early 1970s, a group of buildings was constructed to meet the needs of the increasing foreign affairs, including the diplomatic buildings in Beijing and the foreign trade buildings in Guangzhou (**Figure 6**). These buildings showed modernist influence, and were widely reported by Western media as China's 'new architecture' (Lee and Mealey 1973; Towers and Zumthor 1973; Thompson, Kirkby and Jeffrey 1974; Wagner 1974). In the mid to late 1970s, new architecture spread across the whole country, featuring a consistent modernist language similar to the International Style.

Jianzhu Xuebao resumed in 1973, beginning with an editorial stressing both leftist ideology and pragmatist concerns (Editors 1973). Class struggle and the 'two-line struggle' were emphasized on the one hand, while the policies of Hundred Flowers (1956) and the slogan 'make the past serve the present and foreign things serve China', promoted in 1959, were reconfirmed on the other. A Maoist

phrase, 'Red and Expert', was highlighted to emphasize the combination of communist belief and technical expertise, which reflected the balance of factional struggle in state politics in the early 1970s.⁹ In the issues of 1973, both theoretical discussion and general political propaganda were avoided (except for the editorial statement). A pragmatic and positive atmosphere prevailed, with the spotlight on new modernist buildings in Beijing and Guangzhou. A section named 'Architectural Record' was dedicated to reporting new architecture in China. Another section, 'Friendly Exchanges', reported international communications with foreign countries. International communication in 1973 was particularly active, involving such countries as North Korea, Japan, Finland, Italy, France, Canada, Vietnam and Romania. From 1974 onwards, *Jianzhu Xuebao* was involved in another leftist political movement, launched by Jiang Qing to 'criticize Lin Biao and Confucius', which was actually an attack against Zhou Enlai. From then on,



Figure 6: Qijiyuan Apartments for Foreign Diplomats in Beijing, 1974. Reprinted from *Jianzhu Xuebao*, 1974(1): front cover.

communication with foreign countries was not as intense as in 1973; but the report on the new architecture in China was not affected.

In the 1970s, the absence of theoretical discussion and the flourishing of architectural reports about new architecture formed a compelling contrast. This was a result of a factional struggle in which the pragmatists managed to promote economic development, without challenging leftist ideology. As a result, modernism quietly thrived without any theoretical proclamation.

In this process, architects worked closely with the pragmatic leaders. With this support, architects actively absorbed new knowledge via international exchanges. For example, for the project of the Baiyun Hotel in Guangzhou, a group of top architects from China were sent to Hong Kong to investigate Western hotels there, which inspired them to experiment with modernism as a universal framework compatible with the expression of Chinese cultural identity (Song and Zhu 2016). The architects also adapted to the factional struggle by justifying their works

with politically 'correct' rhetoric. When leftists criticized the horizontal lines of the Baiyun Hotel by arguing that 'horizontal lines represent capitalism; vertical lines represent socialism', the principal architect, Mo Bozhi, could respond from a functional and utilitarian perspective, explaining that the horizontal lines were used for sun shading and to keep off the rain (**Figure 7**).

Conclusion

Throughout the Mao era, state political ideology interfered deeply and directly with architectural discourse. The state played a central and dominant role in the formation of theories, albeit in different ways.

In the 1950s, tension between the individual and the state was the driving force behind the formation and evolution of architectural discourse. A new position, policy, theory or concept in architecture was often proposed by individual architects to specify, interpret or criticize official political agendas; but the state seemed capricious and dictatorial, promoting or suppressing theoretical discussion



Figure 7: The Baiyun Hotel in Guangzhou, 1976 (Editorial Committee 1976).

from time to time. In the 1960s and 1970s, theoretical discussion among architects was gradually suppressed by the state. Architectural policies, propaganda and official statements became the main form of architectural theory. Confrontation between individual and state was gradually replaced by state suppression of individuals.

In Mao's China, there seemed to be no architectural theories systematically and consistently interpreted by either an individual or the state. But there was a clear pattern in the production of architectural theories, which could be summarized as the relationship between 'container' and 'content.' The theoretical concepts proposed as the 'correct' theories by the state were all conceptual 'containers', including Socialist Realism, national form, modern architecture, the Socialist New Style, the Principle and the Design Revolution. 'Contents' enveloped by 'containers' comprised specific knowledge, including both foreign and historical references and related design approaches. The State fabricated a series of conceptual containers, replacing one with another according to the political and practical needs of the time. The specific contents within these conceptual containers were usually not clearly defined, and also shifted from time to time, not necessarily conforming to the developmental logic of containers. A notable gap existed between container and content.

The shifting definition and understanding of 'national form' and 'modern architecture' is a good example by which to analyse this container-content relationship. In the early 1950s, officialdom considered the two concepts as two opposing 'styles', which respectively belonged to socialism and capitalism. From the mid-1950s onwards, the concept of 'modern architecture' was de-emphasized, and the concept of national form gradually expanded to include vernacular architecture, which led to a thriving discussion on local styles in the early 1960s. But in the 1960s, 'modern architecture' was further analysed by praising pre-war – and denouncing post-war – modernism. In the 1970s, in the design of new architecture in Beijing and Guangzhou, national form began to be incorporated into modernism, although this design innovation was not acknowledged in theoretical discussion. The compatibility between the two systems of knowledge was finally acknowledged in theoretical discussion only in the early 1980s, after the Mao era.

Under Mao, both political leaders and architects made huge efforts to ensure that the containers conformed to the overarching Marxist-Leninist ideology and reflected political themes, including socialism, nationalism and modernization. However, specific architectural knowledge and experience were often neglected and excluded from theoretical discussion. Theories based on such Marxist-Leninist concepts as people, class, content and form were often broad, abstract and detached from architectural discipline, for example the lengthy and obscure discussions about form and content in the 1950s (Wang and Wang 2014). These theories often encompassed a wide range of socio-political issues and grand aims to find a single correct answer to guide architectural practice. The conceptual containers envisioned by these theories were often too

large to clearly define their contents. They could neither guide nor theorize architectural practice effectively, due to the lack of critical and in-depth reflections on reality from a professional perspective. In this regard, Lenin's reflectivism, as the theoretical basis of Socialist Realism, failed to be incorporated into theoretical production and was gradually forgotten, being submerged in subsequent imperative political discourses.

Despite the dominant role of the state, the gap between container and content left room for individual architects to intellectually manoeuvre as they interpreted official theories formulated by the state. Key architectural theorists of the time, usually also government officials, including Liang Sicheng and Liu Xiufeng, could incorporate their personal views into official theories. Liang asserted his long-standing interest in historical research to form a National Style; Liu interpreted the Socialist New Style as an inclusive approach to encourage the learning of both the old and the foreign. But in many cases, these personal interpretations were 'dangerous', as exemplified by the vicissitudes of the theories developed by Liang Sicheng and Liu Xiufeng. Their views could be recognized as official theories, then denounced after the political context changed.

Compared with conceptual containers, the accumulation of architectural knowledge was less visible but in fact more important. In particular, the gradual absorption of pre- and post-war modernism was a continuous occurrence interrupted by state ideological control. In this process, Chinese architects needed to deal with the relationship between theory and practice and between individual and state. Modernist architects in the 1950s, such as Zhou Buyi and Hua Lanhong, spent uncompromising efforts in waves of theoretical discussion promoting 'modern architecture', but they themselves became tragic heroes in their confrontation with the state. However, from the late 1950s, architects, including Lin Leyi and Mo Bozhi, began to adopt a pragmatic strategy to leverage the gap between container and content. They were sensitive to the shape and size of the containers, and used both disciplinary knowledge and formal skill to find a proper content for the container. They avoided the theoretical discussion about 'modern architecture', but kept searching for an architecture premised on such values typical of modernism: functionality, efficiency, spatiality, material authenticity. They could also understand the rationale of the official theories from a vantage point similar to that of political leaders, and used political rhetoric to justify their practice as suitable for socialist modernization.

The gap between container and content revealed the existence of architectural autonomy in the Mao era, and challenged the simplistic perspective of 'political determinism' in interpreting the architectural developments of the period. Even though state ideology and political movements were pivotal to the development of architectural theories in Mao's China, it was still the accumulation of knowledge about the architectural profession and discipline that supported the progress of architecture throughout this time.

Notes

- ¹ The approach of collective creation was regarded as the socialist approach to artistic production. It required architects work together as a team and denied individual authorship in architecture (Yu 2013: 103–5).
- ² In 1925, Stalin approved a cultural policy to emphasize the theme of class struggle in literature and art creation. In the 1930s, Socialist Realism became the official architectural style of the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries and was seen as the only correct approach after a severe struggle with modernism. See Hudson (1994).
- ³ According to Wang Ying, 'formalism' only emphasized the composition and image of architecture; while 'structuralism' only emphasized the structure and material of architecture and denied the necessity of decoration.
- ⁴ In this wave of criticism, Liang Sicheng's wife, Lin Huiyin, died of disease and Liang was discovered to have contracted tuberculosis (Fairbank 2009).
- ⁵ Mao launched the Third Front construction (1964–1978) based on national defence concerns to cope with faltering relations with both the Soviet Union and the United States. This policy aimed to develop the southwestern region of China in such industrial sectors as national defence, manufacturing, mining, metal and electricity.
- ⁶ 'High, big, exotic and old' refers to the design with its high standard, large scale, exotic form and old style (Zou 2001: 291–300).
- ⁷ The 'three-in-one combination' was widely used as a slogan in the Design Revolution to denote different scenarios in which the intellectuals (including architects) were asked to work with the non-intellectuals including workers, users, cadres and the radicals (Zou 2001: 291–300).
- ⁸ Lin Biao, the vice-chairman and the designated successor of Mao, died in an alleged coup in 1971.
- ⁹ The phrase 'Red and Expert' was first proposed by Mao in 1957 in the context of the Anti-Rightist campaign. In the 1960s, priority was given to the redness but into the 1970s, the balance between the two was emphasized by the pragmatists (Yang 1997).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Hilde Heynen, Sebastiaan Loosen, Jianfei Zhu and the anonymous reviewers for their support and insightful comments.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Song, K. 2018. Political Ideology and the Production of Architectural Theories in Mao's China (1949–1976). *Architectural Histories*, 6(1): 18, pp.1–15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ah.307>

Published: 14 December 2018

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