1932—A YEAR OF SIGNIFICANCE

In the West, 1932 marked the culmination of a new modernist architecture, labeled the “International Style” by H. H. Richardson and his followers in their exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, a new form of architecture, spreading its influence throughout the world. Partly in reaction to the new development of modernism in China, that year was also a defining moment in the historiography of Chinese architecture. Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin, two young architectural historians, published separate essays in the March issue of the Bulletin of the Chinese Research in Chinese Architecture, establishing an intellectual framework for the following 14 years. Liang’s essay, “On the Modern Characteristics of Chinese Architecture,” was a theoretical attempt to portray Chinese architecture as a process of evolution over thousands of years and strong influence and significance. Moreover, Liang believed that Chinese architecture is a unique and significant system. Moreover, Lin believed that Chinese architecture was essentially a profound construction system in which the “pure timber frame structure” was combined with a coherent aesthetic expression. This was a significant moment because it paved the way for modern Chinese architecture resonated with both the Gothic System in the West and the burgeoning modernist architecture being constructed around the world. Lin further asserted that modern Chinese architecture could be molded into “modern Chinese architecture.” Since China’s timber-frame construction shared the same spatial principles with modern reinforced concrete and steel-frame construction, “one only needs to change the building materials, without radically changing the major structural parts, so that the (new) possibility of the (new) materials will lead to a new development. That work will result in an extremely satisfying new architecture.”

Fully in keeping with Lin’s theoretical formulation of Chinese architecture, Liang’s essay, “Architecture of the Tang Dynasty,” offered an architectural analysis that mapped out the evolution of Chinese architecture with a central thread that flowed together at least three separate strands of thinking. Following both Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Charles de Belleville, Daneri, and Charles de Belleville, Daneri, and Lin and his colleagues published an alternative history book entitled A Brief Account of Chinese Architecture (1944) and Chinese Architecture in the Western Mind (in English) in 1946. Lin’s two books were a full materialization of the intellectual blueprint that he and Liang had drawn up more than ten years before. His Pictorial History was a direct expression of the two essays he and Lin published in 1932, and it focused on the interaction between Chinese architecture and its evolution through four periods: Adolescence (200 BCE–220 CE, Han), Vigor and Rigidity (1400–1912, Ming & Qing), Elegance (1000–1400, Song), and Impressionism (850–1050, Tang). Lin and his colleagues  looking at the countryside. Among the numerous reports published in the Bulletin during this period, not a single essay was devoted to these vernacular buildings. However, from 1937 until 1946, their attitude changed dramatically.

In the remote countryside of Southwest China, they had to cope with the severe lack of funds for public buildings and transportation. Also, there were very few buildings constructed in accordance with the royal standard. Liang and his colleagues had no other choice but to study the humble buildings in which they resided, or nearby. For example, Liang visited an ancient town of Linchuan, the town in which he was residing in Kunming. In 1944, he published a thorough report in the Bulletin, which was the first essay on Chinese vernacular housing ever written by a member of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture. Liu Dunhuan, director of the Society’s Literature and Study Department and one of Liang’s colleagues, measured his parents’ house, the “Liu Residence” in Hunan province, in the same year. Similarly, Liang measured a courtyard compound in Li Zhaung, a small village on the outskirts of Chongqing, where they lived between 1944 and 1946.

CLOSURE

Between 1932 and 1941, Liang and his colleagues visited more than 200 counties in 15 provinces and examined more than 2,000 traditional structures. Based on their case studies, Liang compiled his manuscripts for the History of Chinese Architecture (in Chinese) in 1944, and Chinese Architecture in the Western Mind in English in 1946. Liang’s two books were a full materialization of the intellectual blueprint that he and Lin had drawn up more than ten years before. Lin’s Pictorial History was a direct expression of the two essays he and Lin published in 1932, and it focused on the interaction between Chinese architecture and its evolution through four periods: Adolescence (200 BCE–220 CE, Han), Vigor and Rigidity (1400–1912, Ming & Qing), Elegance (1000–1400, Song), and Impressionism (850–1050, Tang). Lin and his colleagues conducted field research. Liang, Lin and their colleagues looking at the countryside. Among the numerous reports they published in the Bulletin during this period, not a single essay was devoted to these vernacular buildings. However, from 1937 until 1946, their attitude changed dramatically.

Liang and Lin were among the central leaders, who listed the 400-character plan “In the Middle of the 20th Century—The 850-Character Plan” in the Communist Party Central Committee. A series of temples that had survived from the mid-1910s and 1920s. Following both Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Charles de Belleville, Daneri, and Lin and his colleagues collected during their first field study in Ji County, Hebei, to be followed by more than 10 years of jointly conducted field research. Lin, Liang and their colleagues painstakingly surveyed and documented every building, and incorporated it into the histori- cal, genealogical framework they had previously developed. In other words, each building became physical proof of their preconceived theory. All-though Liang and Lin’s and their colleagues’ views were as the first group of Chinese architectural scholars to emphasize the importance of research based on field studies, their approach was radically different from that of another contemporary historian, George Steiner, who asserted that historians should not follow or promote any “ism,” but should collect only objective evidence. Liang and Lin were not book readers (intellectuals). We never look at something in isolation. We work to have a good understanding of the whole, Yellow Spring (Wu Sheng) below, using our hands and feet, to look for things.

CLIMBING UP: 1932–1937

Due to the misery they experienced, Liang and Lin’s escape to the Southwest terribly turned into a fruitful grand tour that greatly expanded their horizons. Their escape across the continent opened their eyes to China’s diverse building types, construction systems and formal expres-sions in response to varied local materials, as well as climatic and cultural conditions. Among all of their discoveries, vernacular housing opened up a new sphere of interest for their architectural study. During the period of 1932–37, Liang and his colleagues focused exclusively on temples built according to royal construction standards, and had been indifferent to vernacular housing in spite of seeing examples everywhere during their trips to the countryside. Among the numerous reports they published in the Bulletin during this period, not a single essay was devoted to these vernacular buildings. However, from 1937 until 1946, their attitude changed dramatically.

During this period, Liang and Lin’s study was a process of constantly “tracing back-climbing up” along the historical trajectory they had established earlier: the configuration of the brackets, from their early stage of simplicity, towards the complex and maturity during the Tang and Song dynasties, and finally to the mature phase. In other words, their structural value “becoming humiliated and overshadowed by encroach-ments Western cultural patterns, today, the writing of Chinese architecture’s history was of paramount importance to both Liang and Lin, as they be-lieved that China’s civilization could only be reconstructed through a new framework of its national heritage.”

Liang and Lin’s structural rationalist approach to show how the birth-to-decline progression had been realized in China’s architectural history. In particular, he chose the “natural growth” of wooden brackets as the most salient expression of Chinese architecture. He started with the configuration of the brackets, from their early stage of simplicity, towards the complex and maturity during the Tang and Song dynasties, and finally to the mature phase. In other words, their structural value “becoming humiliated and overshadowed by encroach-ments Western cultural patterns, today, the writing of Chinese architecture’s history was of paramount importance to both Liang and Lin, as they be-lieved that China’s civilization could only be reconstructed through a new framework of its national heritage.”

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