To Search High and Low: Liang Sicheng, Lin Huiyin, and China's Architectural Historiography, 1932–1946

by Zhu Tao

Lin Huiyin and Liang Sicheng on the Temple of Heaven, Beijing, 1936

1932—A YEAR OF SIGNICANCE

In the West, 1932 was the year that modernist architecture, labeled the "International Style" by Hitchcock and Johnson in their exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, gained new momentum, spreading its influence throughout the world. Partially in reaction to the swift 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 Society for Research in Chinese Architecture*, establishing an intellectual blueprint that would guide their historical studies for the following 14 years.

Lin's essay, "On the Principle Characteristics of Chinese Architecture," was a theoretical attempt to portray Chinese architecture, with its long evolution over thousands of years and strong influence across the vast Asian continent, as a unique and significant system. Moreover, Lin believed that China's wooden architecture demonstrated a profound construction system in which the "pure timber frame structure was always incorporated with a coherent aesthetic expression." It was this principle of "structural rationalism" whereby Chinese architecture resonated with both the Gothic system in the West and the burgeoning modernist architecture being constructed around the world. Lin further speculated about how traditional Chinese architecture could be molded into "modern Chinese architecture." Since China's timber-frame construction shared the same structural 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 in turn will result in an extremely satisfying new architecture."[1]

Fully concurring with Lin's theoretical formulation of Chinese architecture, Liang's essay, "Architecture of the Tang Dynasty," offered an historical analysis that mapped out the evolution of Chinese architecture with a central thread that weaved together at least three separate strands of thinking. Following both Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Charles Darwin, he demonstrated how history evolved in a manner similar to life's cyclical growth: birth-adolescence-maturity-decline. This notion, in turn, led to a nationalist conviction, shared by Liang and many other contemporary Chinese intellectuals, about the fate of Chinese culture. They argued that Chinese culture originated in ancient times, reached its peak during the Tang dynasty, gained its refinement during the Song dynasty, and started to decline during the Ming and Qing dynasties, leading finally to the early-twentieth century reality that it was being humiliated and overshadowed by encroaching Western cultures. Therefore, the writing of China's architectural history was of paramount importance to both Liang and Lin, as they believed that China's civilization could only be reconstructed through "the re-examination of its national heritage."[2]

Liang used a structural-rationalist approach to show how the birth-to-decline progression had been manifested in China's architectural history. In particular, he chose the "natural growth" of wooden brackets as the most salient expression of the rise and fall of China's architectural culture: the configuration of the brackets, from their early stage of simplicity, reached their complexity and maturity during the Tang and Song dynasties, and then gradually "lost their structural value" during the Ming and Qing dynasties, when they degenerated into mere decoration. Within this progression, Liang believed that a high degree of prestige should be applied to Tang architecture because "Tang art was the golden moment of China's art history." However, at the time, Liang was not even certain that any examples of Tang construction had actually survived in China; and he was only able to examine and admire Tang architecture by viewing the images of the Dunhuang Murals and photos of Hōryū-ji, a well-preserved Tang temple in Nara, Japan.[3]

MISSING COMPONENTS

Liang and Lin's historiographical construction was problematic in two respects. First, they were so eager to portray China's traditional architecture as one singular *system*, as important as the Greek, Roman and Gothic were in the West, that they highly generalized the concept of Chinese architecture. In their account, only one dominant architectural style could best represent China's "national style:" the official timber structure exemplified by the Northern Chinese royal palaces and Buddhist temples, especially the ones built during the period from the Tang to Jin dynasties. As a consequence of their idealization, the diversity of China's architectural culture—the multiple construction systems and building types, and in particular, the vernacular buildings of different regions and ethnic groups—was roundly dismissed.

Second, Liang and Lin had theorized Chinese architecture before they had carried out a thorough empirical study. In April 1932, one month after they published their two essays, Liang conducted his first field study in Ji County, Hebei, to be followed by more than 10 years of jointly conducted field research. Liang, Lin and their colleagues painstakingly surveyed and documented each building, and incorporated it into the historical, genealogical framework they had previously developed. In other words, each building became physical proof of their preconceived theory. Although Liang, Lin and their colleagues have been credited 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, Fu Sinian, who insisted that historians should not follow or promote any "-ism," but should collect only objective evidence. Fu's famous slogan: "We're not book readers (intellectuals). We just go all the way to Heaven above and Yellow Spring (hell) below, using our hands and feet, to look for things."[4]

CLIMBING UP: 1932–1937

Mo Zhongjiang under the eaves of the Ying County Wooden Tower, 1933

Lin on the beam of the Bell Tower of Kaiyuan Temple, Zhengding, Hebei, 1933

Liang under the eaves of the library of Longxing Temple, Zhengding, Hebei, 1933

During this period, Liang and Lin's study was a process of constantly "tracing back-climbing up" along the historical trajectory they had established. Based on the knowledge they had gathered from their readings about Ming and Qing architecture in Beijing, they and their colleagues went to the northern Chinese countryside to investigate a series of temples that had survived from the Yuan, Jin, Liao, and finally, Tang dynasties. In July 1937, among numerous discoveries, their greatest triumph was the identification of the Foguang Temple, a timber structure dating back to 857 AD, during the Tang Dynasty, in the Wutai Mountains, Shanxi Province. This breakthrough was a powerful repudiation of Japan's declaration that one could only see Tang structures in Japan, a position that tormented Liang and Lin for years. Finding the Foguang Temple was the pinnacle of their careers.

Liang, Lin and their colleagues looking for the Tang-era Foguang Temple in the Wutai Mountains, 1937.

Yet, at this juncture, history could not have been more dramatic. The most glorious moment in Liang and Lin's career was also one of the darkest ones in China's modern history. On July 8, 1937, when Liang, Lin and his colleagues were celebrating their finding of the Foguang Temple, absorbed in measuring the building deep in the Wutai Mountains, the Lugouqiao Incident broke out in Beijing's outskirts. Japan invaded China, sparking the Second Sino-Japan War. This forced Liang, Lin and their colleagues to immediately flee to Southwest China, where they would stay in hiding for nine years.

SENT DOWN: 1937–1946

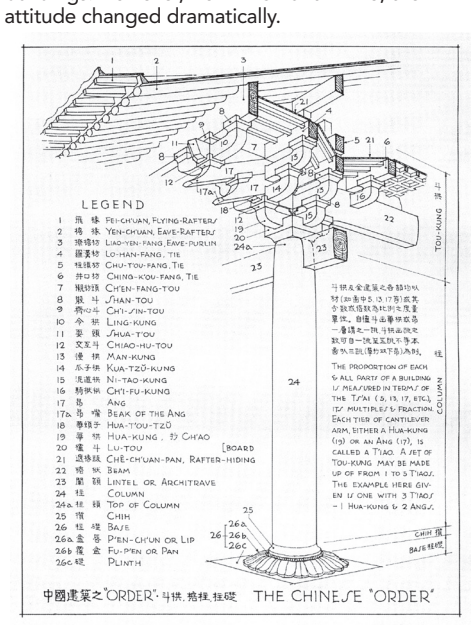
Despite the misery they experienced, Liang and Lin's exile to the Southwest ironically turned into a fruitful grand tour that greatly expanded their horizons.[5] Their escape across the continent opened their eyes to China's diverse building types, construction systems and formal expressions in response 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.

Living in the remote countryside of Southwest China, they had to cope with the severe lack of financial support and access to transportation. Also, there were very few buildings constructed in accordance with the royal standard. Liang and his colleagues had no other choice but to closely study the humble buildings in which they resided, or others nearby. For example, Liu Zhiping, an assistant of Liang, measured the courtyard house he inhabited in Kunming. In 1944, he published a thorough report in the *Bulletin*, which was the first essay on China's vernacular housing ever written by a member of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture.[6] Liu Dunzhen, director of the Society's Literature Study Department and one of Liang's colleagues, measured his parents' countryside home, "Liu Residence" in Hunan province, in the same year. Similarly, Liang measured a courtyard compound in Li Zhuang, 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 completed his manuscripts for the *History of Chinese Architecture* (in Chinese) in 1944, and *Chinese Architecture, A Pictorial History* (in English) in 1946.[7] Liang's two books were a full materialization of the intellectual blueprint that he and Lin had drawn up more than ten years before. His *Pictorial History* was a direct expansion of the two essays he and Lin published in 1932, and it focused only on the structural rationalist principles of Chinese timber construction and its evolution through four periods: Adolescence (200 BCE–220 CE, Han), Vigor (850–1050, Tang), Elegance (1000–1400, Song), and Rigidity (1400–1912, Ming & Qing). Liang's other book did mention some other elements, such as masonry structures, vernacular housing, and gardens, but this section was quite marginal compared to his extensive account of timber royal palaces and temples. The heterogeneous materials Liang and his colleagues collected during their exile in Southwest China, e.g., the vernacular, the minority, the ordinary, and the unorthodox, which could have added complexity and diversity to his historical account, were largely excluded or repressed in Liang's writing.

Awareness of these materials occurred 10 years later. During the 1950s, when Marxism-Leninism became the dominant ideology in Mao's China, Liang was constantly attacked for being too bourgeois, with no sense of the class struggle. His colleague, Liu Dunzhen, one of the many who criticized Liang, rose to prominence during this period. All of the materials that Liang, Liu, and their colleagues had collected in Southwest China formed the central content of Liu's alternative history book entitled *A Brief Account of Chinese Dwellings*, published in 1956.[8] ×



Liang's illustration of the evolution of the Chinese "order" in his *Pictorial History*.

All images courtesy of the Library of School of Architecture, Tsinghua University, Beijing

Notes

1. Lin Huiyin, "On the Principle Characteristics of Chinese Architecture," *Bulletin of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture* III, no.1 (1932): 163-79.
2. Liang and Lin were among the Chinese intellectuals who grew up during China's New Culture Movement of the mid-1910s and 1920s. They were particularly inspired by Hi Shi, one of movement's central leaders, who listed four major tasks that Chinese intellectuals needed to carry out: "studying issues," "importing theories," "reexamining the national heritage," and "recreating civilization." Hu Shi, "The Meaning of New Tide," *New Youth* 7, no.1 (1919).
3. Liang Sicheng, "Architecture of the Tang Dynasty," *Bulletin* III, no.1 (1932): 75-114.
4. Fu Sinian, "The Objective of Working in the Institute of History and Philology," *Collection of Mr. Fu Mengzhen's Academic Essays* (Hong Kong: Longmen Bookstore, 1969), 179-80.
5. On the way to the Southwest, Lin Huiyin contracted tuberculosis, and thus was much less involved in the field trips during the years of 1938-46.
6. Liu Zhiping, "Yunnan Stamp House," *Bulletin* VII, no.1 (1944): 63-94.
7. Liang's *History of Chinese Architecture* was formally published by Baihua Wenyi Publishing House (Tianjin) in 1998. His *Chinese Architecture, A Pictorial History* (in English), edited by Wilma Fairbank, was published by the MIT Press in 1984.
8. Liu Dunzhen, *A Brief Account of Chinese Dwellings* (Beijing: Architecture Engineering Publishing House, 1957).

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