



WHAT IF? WHAT NEXT?

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THE TRANSLATION OF ARCHITECTURAL THEORIES IN 1980s CHINA

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After three decades of tight political restriction on access to foreign ideas, China witnessed a flood of translated theoretical texts during the 1980s. This paper will focus on the translation of the seminal Foreign Theoretical Books Series initiated by Wang Tan (1916-2001), which included a wide range of topics spanning a relatively long period (the 1910s to the 1980s). Together with other translations in the journals, it fundamentally affected the way most architects and architectural students understood Western architectural theories during the 1980s.

A study of the circumstances in which the series was initiated, the books and versions which were selected for translation, and how the books were translated into Chinese will shed important light on the transfer of Western architectural theories to China and the formation of new architectural knowledge in the 1980s. This paper highlights the misunderstandings and limitations which attended this process. It nevertheless argues that, despite these drawbacks, the theories translated into Chinese helped to change the paradigm of Chinese architectural discourse, facilitating the replacement of revolutionary architectural terminology with new, modern architectural terminology. The paper will contribute to a better understanding of the challenges and difficulties in importing Western architectural ideas into China in cross-cultural circumstances.

Introduction

Unlike its Western counterpart, architecture as a modern discipline in China has a history of little more than a century: perhaps 120 years at most. This relatively short span of time made it difficult for a nuanced appreciation of Western theories to develop. After three decades in which access to foreign ideas was tightly restricted, the 1980s witnessed a flood of numerous translated theoretical discourses, of which the most notable were Postmodernism, Phenomenology, Semiotics, Aesthetics, and Deconstructionism.

This paper focuses on the translation of the seminal *Foreign Theoretical Books Series*, initiated by Wang Tan (1916-2001).¹ (Fig. 1) The series selected a wide range of topics spanning a relatively long period of time (the 1910s to the 1980s). Thus, theories from several different periods were explained at the same time. Together with other journal translations in the 1980s and early 1990s, the series fundamentally influenced the way in which Chinese architects and architectural students understood Western architectural theories. Therefore, it received a number of positive comments, and was praised for its seminal role, though with little in-depth analysis. Even some recent studies have neglected to provide a critical appraisal of the series. Wu Jing's doctoral thesis on the teaching and research of Western architectural history and theory in twentieth-century China briefly discussed the *Foreign Theoretical Books Series*, pointing out that it was dedicated to "presenting the ins and outs of Western contemporary architectural thought," from a "broad," "interdisciplinary" and "multifaceted" perspective.² Zhu Xuan's master's thesis included a discussion of Wang's introduction to Western architectural theories, in which he observed that "Wang Tan examined modern Western architectural theories from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives."³ Undoubtedly, Wang's efforts and contributions to Chinese architectural scholarship in a particular era are historically significant, but when viewed in a larger historical context, his limitations and those of the series in general need to be confronted and appraised.



Figure 1. The covers of books in the series

By looking at the circumstances in which the series was launched, considering the books selected for translation, and comparing the differences between the original texts and their translations, the paper illustrates the constraints on the translation process in the 1980s. It nevertheless argues that, despite these constraints, the translated texts changed the paradigm of Chinese architectural discourse, facilitating the replacement of revolutionary terminology with new, modern terminology. At the same time, it recognizes that half-understood translations and fragmented theories, adopted without sufficient consideration for their context in the broader perspective of academic history, as well as the mode of introduction of theories, affected the overall understanding of various theories, their contexts, and relevance. This resulted in a preference for knowledge of facts over theoretical and logical thinking, a state of affairs which only changed with the introduction of tectonics in the late 1990s.

Absence of Architectural Theory and the Anxiety of Design Methods

Due partly to the isolation imposed by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), revolutionary terminology continued to hold sway in Chinese academic writing throughout the 1970s, before gradually dying away in the 1980s. Abstract controversies which had typified the writings of the 1950s, such as the debate over “content” and “form,” were still dominant. But in 1979 Deng Xiaoping’s China was encouraged to “modernize” on all fronts. This “modernization” naturally included the building industry, which had been suffering from a lack of resources for education. This situation was reflected by Wang’s expression of his intention — “to overcome the disability of reading English literature and the lack of original academic books, and to highlight some books that deserve to be read carefully.”⁴ In this process, a large number of Western theories were presented to Chinese architects, who were thirsty for new knowledge and theory, so the orientation of theories was definitely needed, as Wang pointed out,

In recent years, international cultural communication has been given more attention than in the past. Young architects, as well as teachers and students of architecture, have been confronted with the various foreign theories—semiotics, “three theories” (information theory, cybernetics, and systems theory), symbolism in architecture, Postmodernism, etc. On the one hand, I am delighted because they have no prejudice but freedom in thoughts. On the other hand, however, I worry that our architects are too willing to follow others’ opinions and change their ideas accordingly, wasting their energy during the most vigorous period of their lives in irrelevant excitements. ... Despite the differences in time and space from our country’s current situation, there is still something to be learned from these theories.⁵

This was the reality of the early 1980s, and explains Wang’s main purpose in organizing translations from Western texts. Besides, the search for design methods was also an urgent task for him, which he expressed in “The Methodology of Modern Architectural Design.”⁶ He selected the books in order to solve the problem of the lack of architectural theories, design methods, overall understanding and judgment.

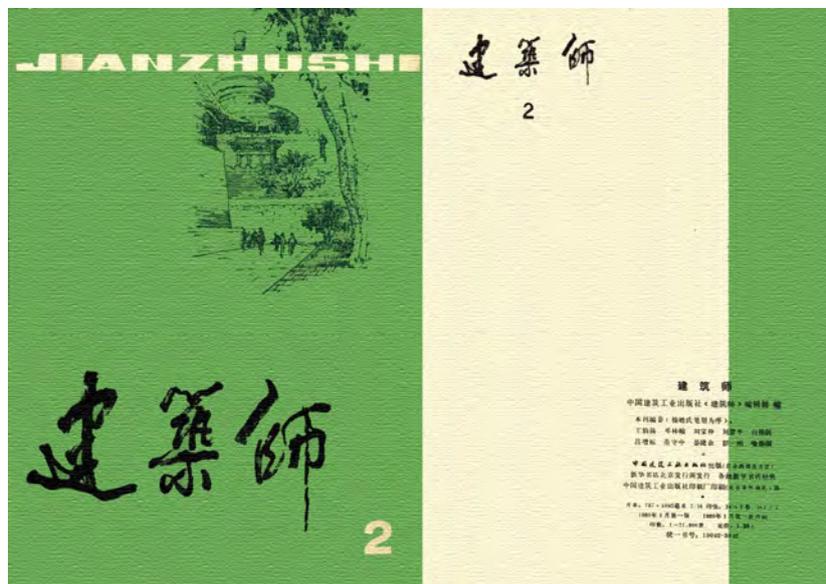


Figure 2. The front and back of the journal *The Architects*.

The earliest translations appeared in the journal *The Architects* (建筑师, 1979-, Fig. 2), which promoted the introduction of Western architecture, architects and architectural theories in a comprehensive way. It contained sections entitled “Garden for Young and Middle-aged Architects”, “Introduction to Foreign Architecture”, and “Translations”. There were two main types of articles: translations (both full translations and abridged translations) and introductions. Most of these introductions selected and retold some parts from multiple books, and were rarely characterized by strict academic rigour.

Starting with the second issue in January 1980, translations of theoretical works were published in serial form. The first few books included Yoshinobu Ashihara's *Exterior Design in Architecture* (1975), Bruno Zevi's *Architecture as Space* (1957) and *The Modern Language of Architecture* (1978). These were soon followed by Charles Jencks's *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* and Christian Norberg-Schulz's *Existence, Space and Architecture* (1984). These books showed a strong interest in "space." After initially appearing in the journal, most of these books were later published in the *Architect Series*. Its publications included *Exterior Design in Architecture*, *Architecture as Space*, *The Modern Language of Architecture*, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, *Existence, Space and Architecture*, and *The Image of the City*. These books will be discussed together with the *Foreign Theoretical Books Series* in this paper.

	Author(s)	Book	Date	
1	Geoffrey Scott	The Architecture of Humanism	1914	
2	Nikolaus Pevsner	Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius	1936	
3	Eliel Saarinen	Search for Form: A Fundamental Approach to Art	1948	Not in the original list
4	Steen Eiler Rasmussen	Experiencing Architecture	1959	
5	Peter Collins	Changing Ideas in Modern Architecture	1965	
6	Robert Venturi	Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture	1966	
7	Geoffrey Broadbent	Design in Architecture: Architecture and the Human Sciences	1973	
8	Roger Scruton	The Aesthetics of Architecture	1979	
9	Geoffrey Broadbent, Richard Bunt, and Charles Jencks	Signs, Symbols and Architecture	1980	
10	Manfredo Tafuri	Theories and Histories of Architecture	1980	
11	Amos Rapoport	The Meaning of Built Environment: A Nonverbal Communication Approach	1982	Not in the original list

Table 1: *The Foreign Theoretical Books Series* published during 1987-1992.

	Author(s)	Book	Date	
1	Frank Lloyd Wright	The Future of Architecture	1953	
2	Walter Gropius	Scope of Total Architecture	1956	
3	Kevin Lynch	The Image of the City	1960	Published in the Architect Series
4	Jane Jacobs	The Death and Life of Great American Cities	1963	
5	Christian Norberg-Schulz	Intentions in Architecture	1963	
6	Edward T. Hall	The Hidden Dimension	1969	
7	Robert Sommer	Personal Space	1969	
8	Christian Norberg-Schulz	Existence, Space and Architecture	1971	Published in the Architect Series
9	Oscar Newmann	The Defensible Space	1972	
10	Amos Rapoport	Human Aspects of urban Form: Towards a Man-Environment Approach to Urban Form and Design	1977	
11	Christopher Alexander	A Pattern Language	1977	
12	Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter	Collage City	1978	

Table 2: Other books proposed by Wang Tan in the list of 21 books.

Selection and Translation of the Series: Limitations and Misunderstandings

In the mid-1980s, Wang began to organize the translation of the series. He had a wide range of reading interests and his nearly year-long experience with Frank Lloyd Wright had made him familiar with the context of architectural literature in English. He proposed 21 books for translation initially. In the event, only 11 books were finally translated and published, between 1987 and 1992.⁷ (Table 1 and 2) Some of books that were not published were due to copyright issues, such as *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and *Intentions in Architecture*, and some were published in *the Architect Series*, such as *The Image of the City* and *Existence, Space and Architecture*. The 21 books had a certain diversity of architectural theories plus the translations published in *The Architects* and *the Architect Series*. The contents covered history, theory, and design methodology, and focused on the themes of space, environment, experience, aesthetics, semiotics, meanings, architectural language, phenomenology, city, and Modernism/Postmodernism. Even if the contents of these books looked diverse, Wang's choices were united by his focus on a single aspect. According to an interview with Lai Delin, who was a doctorate student of Wang in the 1980s, Wang had a fundamental aim in mind:

Professor Wang was interested in theory, and especially the relationship between theory and design. His interest in introducing China to texts such as Eiler Rasmussen's *Experiencing Architecture*, Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*, and Christian Norberg-Schulz's *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* was aroused by his dissatisfaction with the design methods associated with the Beaux-Arts and Bauhaus movements. He was trying to learn and introduce the newest design methods.⁸

Wang expressed some anxiety about learning from Western theories in his article:

Nowadays, architects both praise and criticize Postmodernism with different opinions. When commenting on a particular architectural style, one often focuses on some aspects and neglects others according to one's habitual perception. In my opinion, it is pointless to care about whether Postmodernism has become a school that is strong enough to fight Modernism, or how long it will last. The architectural art changes with the development of society, with an increasing frequency and variety. Postmodernism will inevitably be replaced by a new idea in the future. It is crucial that we learn valuable lessons from various schools so that the idea for creating will be more active, the path of creating will be broader, and architectural works will be more diverse.⁹

This passage expressed several points: first, his attitude towards the then-fashionable theory of Postmodernism; second, the emphasis on ways to learn from the West; third, the goal of enriching architectural design; and fourth, the pursuit of diversity. The last point aroused his interest in many architectural theories. On the other hand, as Lai noted, "Professor Wang was very open to pluralism, but this also made him somewhat uncritical".¹⁰

Wang's concern about design methods dominated his selection of books. His interest in humanism and human sciences in the postmodern era was a second reason, which can be seen in his introductions to seven of the books published in *World Architecture* in 1985 and 1986. Commenting on Geoffrey Scott's *The Architecture of Humanism*, he wrote, "*The Times* has reviewed it as the most important contribution to architectural aesthetics since the work of John Ruskin. ...We are now entering the so-called 'postmodern' phase, a circumstance more suited to Scott's view."¹¹ He pointed out that Geoffrey Broadbent's *Design in Architecture: Architecture and the Human Sciences* discussed "the humanities, the methodology of technics, information theory, control theory, systems theory, computer-aided design, Gestalt psychology, and so on."¹² He emphasized not only the humanities but also the integration of new science, technology, and design. Many disciplines in China in the 1980s had this tendency. As Wu Jing said, the series was broad and interdisciplinary. This is also a common assessment of the series by subsequent researchers of Wang. Certainly, had all 21 books eventually been published, the scope of coverage would be broader. However, the fundamental problem is not the publications' coverage but the lack of an attempt to contextualize the historical and structural relationship of these theories against their broader historical background.

To be fair, Wang did attempt to provide some contexts for the theories in his writings. For example, in the article series entitled “Trends in Modern Western Architectural Theories” (based on the syllabus of his course “Introduction to Modern Architecture”), he noted that the current architectural writings “came from architectural historians, architects or newspaper columnists. Each of the three kinds of writing has its own characteristics.”¹³ He tried to point out how Jencks’s *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* was perceived in different positions. He also stated in his article, “Newspaper columnists tend to follow the trend and use what they know to make a comment they wish to make. Sometimes they do make the point. Take critics like Tom Wolfe. He called himself an amateur and wrote about whatever he wanted. This is a special case. But some knew and loved architecture, so possessed real insights into architecture, such as Huxtable.”¹⁴ However, the Chinese translations of Wolfe’s book *From Bauhaus to Our House* (1981) and Ada Louise Huxtable’s articles¹⁵ were welcomed by Chinese architects as valuable pieces of professional writing.

In the second paper of the series, Wang included a section on Postmodernism, in which discussed the response to Postmodernism in the Soviet Union with reference to Catherine Cooke’s “Soviet Reaction to Post-Modernism” (in *Architectural Design*, 1982), as well as the dialogue of Bruno Zevi and Paolo Portoghesi.¹⁶ He attempted to provide multiple understandings and contexts of Postmodernism. In the third paper, when discussing architectural language and semiology, he offered two opposing perspectives of scholars on the issue of architecture as language and sign.¹⁷ However, this effort still could not compensate for the misunderstandings caused by the lack of the consciousness of academic history of architecture.

There is an example of this issue in the translation of *The Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, a book from Wang’s series. It was translated from the second edition, initially with 350 illustrations, while the Chinese version had only 101. A large number of pictures of ancient architecture were omitted. Of the 77 plans of buildings in the original book, only 17 planes were used, an even lower percentage. This also happened to other translated books during the period. As to the reduction of illustrations in the Chinese version, the translator Zhou Puyi explained in the afterword of his translation published in the journal:

As for the pictures, because the author preferred the unique style of the classical art of sixteenth-century Italy and Ancient Greece, the weird Baroque in seventeenth-century Europe, and the delicate Rococo in eighteenth-century Europe, most of the illustrations in the original book are of these buildings, which are “neither beautiful nor great.” I have decided to print only a selection of these pictures. Only those that are representative and essential for his argument have been kept, and the rest deleted. The illustrations chosen in the translation are less than one-third of the original.¹⁸

The translator’s opinion that a large number of the historical pictures were useless shows that he did not fully understand the original book and did not know the characteristics and contributions of Venturi’s scholarship, whose book was above all based on a rich knowledge of architectural history. The translator also did not grasp the historical function of this influential book. This is the result of the lack of a historical context for the scholarship in his knowledge. In addition, misunderstandings of sentences, inaccurate translations of words, and omitted sentences were all present in the Chinese version. Indeed, such faults were quite common in translations generally from this period.

Formation of New Architectural Discourse

Revolutionary terminology died hard, and could still occasionally be found in texts written in the 1980s. For instance, in “A Discussion on the Basic Problems of Architectural Theory”:

The three characters of architecture, i.e., classness, scientificity (including technology), and creativity of architecture, are taken as the underlying problems of architectural theory. Classness is the ideological basis of creating, and scientificity is the material basis of creating, so the three are not divided and isolated but organically connected.¹⁹

The language of this passage has a distinct flavor of the 1950s. The ideological terms (classness, ideological basis, material basis, and organic connection) are not argued, but simply asserted as axiomatic. This particular passage, it should be noted, is not representative of its period, as ideologically-charged language went rapidly out of fashion in the early 1980s. Nevertheless, there was a brief transitional period, in which the new, imported Western theories were discussed and explained using the revolutionary terminology of the 1950s. For instance, Zhou commented in his afterword:

The Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture is Venturi's insight as an architect into the dogmatic tendencies in the theoretical issues of architecture, the popular form of architecture, and debate on form and content at the time. ...The book's value also lies in its spirit of reflection and inquiry. It not only shows us the inadequacies of modernist theory and the limitations of the norms it established, and the need to innovate in order to move forward, but more importantly, it leads us to think practically and to break through the rules and regulations that constrain our creativity.²⁰

Zhou used ideological terms here: "dogmatic tendencies", "debate on form and content", and "breaking through the rules and regulations that constrain our creativity", all of which are characteristic terms of the revolutionary period. But when confronted with the postmodern issues that the book focused on, Zhou inevitably used some new terms that he learned from the book for the discussion, which went beyond the formulae of revolutionary terminology. The coexistence of these two terminologies was very common during this transitional period. For example, Wang Shenyou reflected on modern architecture in "A Brief Commentary on the Trends of Western Architecture". He read widely and deeply with an understanding of the limits of modernist history, such as Pevsner and Gideon's works, as well as an understanding of Pruitt-Igoe that went beyond Jenks's book. He observed of a particular social problem that it was due to residential segregation rather than to modern architecture per se. But he explained this in terms of class analysis: "It should be seen as a social problem, not a technical problem of architecture. The authorities of the ruling class were the directors of this tragedy. It had nothing to do with modern architecture and the architect who designed it."²¹ "Some Western architects cherish the democratic rights of the masses, gained through struggle, and actively support them with their actions."²²

On the other hand, the language for discussing new things needed to be gradually accumulated, and translating was a kind of way to add new Chinese expressions in architecture. Zhou had a statement explaining this situation:

Indeed, it is not easy to understand this book. It is even more difficult to translate it into smooth and easily understandable Chinese with a limited number of existing architectural terms. ... There are also a lot of new architectural terms in the book that have never been seen before. ... Some come from literature, painting, poetry, and music, some from mathematics, physics, and other scientific and technical disciplines, but they have all been translated into architectural terms in their original meaning by consulting professional dictionaries.²³

Obviously, after decades in which revolutionary terminology had held the field, Chinese architectural discourse was impoverished. In this case, the introduced and translated Western theoretical writings brought new knowledge and concepts of the discipline. Translators resorted to dictionaries and the language used in other disciplines to find appropriate expressions for the new terms, and in the process they established the foundation of modern architectural discourse. The linguistic difficulties of translation pushed forward the gradual enrichment of the terms of architectural discourse in 1980s China.

Conclusion

Given the limited resources available in the 1980s, Wang Tan did his best to introduce architectural theories while providing contexts and comparative perspectives for the readers. His efforts, and those of a few other scholars, played a decisive role in opening up the theoretical

horizon of Chinese architects at that time and made the 1980s and 1990s a transitional moment in the discipline of architecture in China. Yet there were not many such scholars in the 1980s, so the impact of the multi-dimensional and comparative understanding Wang tried to promote was not high. Moreover, Chinese architectural scholars and architects generally did not realize the importance of academic history, and did not have a nuanced understanding of Western architectural theories in the historical and scholarly contexts. This was the most critical limitation of that era.

Therefore, Wang failed to provide a historical, in-depth relationship and a structural comprehension of the theories. The result was that architectural theories were introduced not in their totality, but only in scattered extracts, often in simplified and abridged translations. Furthermore, the imported theories were only partially understood, while Chinese architects were accustomed to learning and accepting theories in this way. This was the condition of architectural knowledge in the 1980s and 1990s. It persisted until the introduction of tectonics in the late 1990s, when Chinese scholars and architects, mostly born in the 1950s and 1960s, began to study Western theories more comprehensively.

On the other hand, with the emergence, understanding, and translation of new concepts, the borrowing of vocabulary from other disciplines, the enrichment of Chinese terms of architecture, and the diminishing use of ideological terminology, Chinese architectural discourse was gradually transformed, in this exploratory manner, into a new modern discourse.

Endnotes

- 1 Wang Tan graduated from the Central University in 1941 with a degree in architecture, worked for several years as an architect in the Xingye Architects Office, and spent eleven months at Frank Lloyd Wright's office in 1948 and 1949.
- 2 Wu Jing, "Waiguo jianzhushi de Zhongguo yanjiu: yi Zhongguo jianzhu jiaoyu wei li" [The research of foreign architecture history in China: the case of architectural education in China] (doctor, Tianjin University, 2017), 303-304.
- 3 Zhu Xuan, "Jianzhu lilunjia Wang Tan xueshu chengjiu yu yingxiang" [Academic achievement and influence of architectural theoretician Wang Tan] (Master, Chinese National Academy of Arts, 2013), 28. Author's translation.
- 4 Wang Tan, "Jianzhu lilun yicong qianyan" [The introduction of *The Foreign Theoretical Books Series*], *Shijie jianzhu*, no. 6 (1986): 67. Author's translation.
- 5 Wang, "Jianzhu Lilun Yicong qianyan," 67. Author's translation.
- 6 Wang Tan, "Xiandai jianzhu sheji fangfalun" [The methodology of modern architectural design], *Shijie jianzhu* [World architecture], no. 2 (1980): 3-5.
- 7 *Search for Form: A Fundamental Approach to Art* (1948) and *The Meaning of Built Environment: A Nonverbal Communication Approach* (1982) were not included in the list of 21 books.
- 8 Lai Delin, interview by the author, 24 May 2017.
- 9 Wang Tan, "Guanyu Jianzhu Lilun Yiwen Congshu 2" [On *The Foreign Theoretical Books Series*], *Shijie jianzhu* [World architecture], no. 5 (1985): 26. Author's translation.
- 10 Lai Delin, interview by the author, 24 May 2017.
- 11 Wang Tan, "Guanyu Jianzhu Lilun Yiwen Congshu 1" [On *The Foreign Theoretical Books Series*], *Shijie jianzhu* [World architecture], no. 4 (1985): 69. Author's translation.
- 12 Wang, "Guanyu Jianzhu Lilun Yiwen Congshu 2," 58. Author's translation.
- 13 Wang Tan, "Xiandai xifang jianzhu lilun dongxiang 1" [Trends in modern Western architectural theories], *Jianzhushi* [The architects], no. 14 (Mar 1983): 46. Author's translation.
- 14 Wang, "Xiandai xifang jianzhu lilun dongxiang 1," 46. Author's translation.
- 15 Ada Louis Huxtable, "Xiandai jianzhu de hunluan jumian" [The Troubled State of Modern Architecture], trans. Wang Shenyong, *Jianzhushi* [The architects], no. 24 (Nov 1985): 197-205, 224. And Ada Louis Huxtable, "Xiandai jianzhu yijing 'shouzhongzhengqin' le ma? [Is Modern Architecture Dead?]," trans. Wang Shenyong, *Jianzhushi* [The architects], no. 17 (Dec 1983): 193-203.

¹⁶ Wang Tan, “Xiandai xifang jianzhu lilun dongxiang 2” [Trends in modern Western architectural theories], *Jianzhushi* [The architects], no. 16 (Oct 1983): 44–54.

¹⁷ Wang Tan, “Xiandai xifang jianzhu lilun dongxiang 3” [Trends in modern Western architectural theories], *Jianzhushi* [The architects], no. 23 (July 1985): 1–23, 44.

¹⁸ Zhou Buyi, “Jianzhu de Fuzaxing He Maodunxing yihouji” [The afterword of *The Complexity and Contradiction of Architecture*], *Jianzhushi* [The architects], no. 8 (Sep 1981): 215. Author’s translation.

¹⁹ Liu Hongdian, “Dui jianzhu lilun jiben wenti de tantao” [A discussion on the basic problems of architectural theory], *Jianzhushi* [The architects], no. 8 (Sep 1981): 41. Author’s translation.

²⁰ Zhou, “Jianzhu de Fuzaxing He Maodunxing yihouji,” 214-15. Author’s translation.

²¹ Wang Shenyong, “Lüe ping xifang jianzhu de fazhan qushi” [A brief commentary on the trends of Western architecture], *Jianzhushi* [The architects], no. 11 (Aug 1982): 142–43. Author’s translation.

²² Wang, “Lüe ping xifang jianzhu de fazhan qushi,” 148. Author’s translation.

²³ Zhou, “Jianzhu de Fuzaxing He Maodunxing yihouji,” 215. Author’s translation.