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Social Critiques and Responses of Selected Contemporary Chinese Architects, 1990s-2000s

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Under the economic reform in China, a new generation of independent Chinese architects emerged in the 1990s. No longer required to work for state-owned design institutes collectively, they enjoy more freedom to conduct individual architectural experimentation as compared to their predecessors before the era of Mao. Some architects, such as Yung Ho Chang, Liu Jiakun, Wang Shu, and Zhang Lei, are not confined to a narrow concern with architectural forms, but have expressed social critique and responses through their work. This paper will examine their social critiques and responses from three perspectives: massive demolition and destruction, urban development and revitalization, as well as housing and resettlement.

Chinese contemporary architecture has experienced a major transformation under the economic reform since 1978. The “Open Door Policy” in China has triggered staggering economic growth and fostered social liberalization. The economic reform has been further strengthened by the Southern Tour of Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) in 1992, reinforcing the direction that “development is the hard truth” (*fazhan shi ying daoli*; 發展是硬道理). A professional registration system for architects in China was promulgated in 1994-95, initiating a fundamental change in architectural practice by allowing the co-existence of official design institutes and private practices.¹ The expanding middle class in society and emerging design-oriented developers facilitate the emergence of independent Chinese architects. Some architects, such as Yung Ho Chang (張永和), Liu Jiakun (劉家琨), Wang Shu (王澐), and Zhang Lei (張雷), are not confined themselves to a narrow concern with architectural forms, but have expressed their social critiques and responses, which are worthy of detailed analysis.

1. Jianfei Zhu, *Architecture of Modern China: A Historical Critique* (London: Routledge, 2009), 113.



Referring to the development of modern architecture in the West, it is commonly acknowledged that the original socially relevant mission of the architectural avant-garde in the 1920s “withered away.”² When Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson introduced modern architecture to the United States as “International Style” by the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1932, stylistic expression became the prime concern, ignoring any social agenda. Sigfried Giedion in his seminal work, *Space, Time and Architecture* emphasizes the new awareness of time and space of modern architecture as “a new tradition” rather than its social vision.³ Colin Rowe offered a vivid description of the separation of form and social concern of modern architecture on the journey from Europe to America, leading to the proliferation of International Style, adhering to the *physique-flesh* or architectural form, but eliminating the *morale*-word, or social content.⁴ As observed by Michael Hays, the shift towards autonomous formal operations “shuts down certain social functions that architecture had previously performed.”⁵

The western architectural history is no longer regarded as universal history from the perspective of “entangled modernities.”⁶ The assumption of a linear, progressive model of modernity has been challenged by heterogeneous trajectories of modernity in non-Euro-American regions. Compared to the West, modern architectural development in China in the twentieth century was substantially influenced by political ideology, including the National Style promoted by the Nationalist government during the Nanjing Decade (1927-37), and the “National form, socialist content” advocated by the Communist government in the Mao’s era (1949-76). Within these periods of time, the design freedom of architects was substantially confined. Although Chinese architects were allowed to have private practice in the pre-Mao’s era, their design opportunities were limited due to political turmoil and social upheavals. From 1952 onwards, Chinese architects were required to work for state-owned design institutes until the implementation of the architect registration system in 1994-95. Working for official institution, architects became public servants fulfilling national political tasks and enforcing government policies collectively. In contrast to their predecessors, Chinese architects nowadays enjoy more freedom for individual expression and design authorship. In this paper, the social critiques and responses of the four selected Chinese architects, Chang, Liu, Wang, and Zhang will be discussed based on three major issues: massive demolition and destruction, urban development and revitalization, as well as housing and resettlement.

2. Hilde Heynen, ““What Belongs to Architecture?” Avant-Garde Ideas in the Modern Movement,” *Journal of Architecture* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1999), 142.

3. Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 29-43.

4. Colin Rowe, “Introduction to *Five Architects*,” (1972) in *Architecture Theory since 1968*, ed. K. Michael Hays (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 74-84.

5. Michael Hays, “The Oppositions of Autonomy and History,” in *Oppositions Reader: Selected Readings from a Journal for Ideals and Criticism in Architecture, 1973-1984*, ed. K. Michael Hays (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), xiii.

6. Lu Dufang, “Entangled Modernities in Architecture,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, eds. C. Greig Crysler, Stephen Cairns and Hilde Heynen (London: SAGE, 2012), 231-46.

Massive Demolition and Destruction

Facing massive demolition of Chinese vernacular architecture, both Chang and Wang have tried to respond through their work. For the Small Museum of Contemporary Art in Quanzhou (泉州, 1998), Chang proposed to follow local building techniques of recycling stones and bricks for new wall construction; yet, this project was not realised.⁷ Similar way of thinking has also been developed by Wang in his series of work from 2002 onwards. Concerning with the cultural values of old towns and villages, he is strongly against the extensive demolition of the historic fabric and emphasizes the importance of the continuity of living traditions, which can be passed on to the next generations.⁸ To avoid the extinction of craftsmanship traditions due to rapid urbanization, he intentionally increases the participation of craftspeople in his work by combining folk building techniques and modern construction technology.

For having a better understanding of traditional building construction, Wang and his team since 2001 have conducted a series of researches on vernacular architecture in Cicheng (慈城), a small town in Zhejiang (浙江) near Ningbo (寧波). Due to the close proximity to the sea, people living in Cicheng are easily affected by typhoons, which can cause their houses to collapse, and have been used to recycle available broken roof tiles and bricks to rebuild their houses within a short period of time after natural disasters. This recycled tile and brick mixed construction method is called *Wa Pan* (瓦片).⁹ The aesthetic beauty of *Wa Pan* walls and the folk tradition of using limited available resources renewably deeply impressed Wang. Following his research on Cicheng, he applied the local techniques to his work, ranging from his small experiment of the Five Scattered Houses in Ningbo (2003), the Xiangshan (象山) Campus of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou (杭州, 2004, 2007) to the Ningbo History Museum (2008). At the time when the Five Scattered Houses were built, the *Wa Pan* construction tradition was under threat. Local craftspeople were unfamiliar with such building techniques, requiring Wang to bring relevant photos and detailed arrangement drawings to site for reference. The continuous experiment of this vernacular construction method in his work over the last ten years is not only a constant training process for craftspeople, but has also rescued a regional tradition from oblivion.

7. Laurent Gutierrez and Valérie Portefaix, eds. *Yung Ho Chang/ Atelier Feichang Jianzhu: A Chinese Practice* (Hong Kong: Map Book Publishing, 2003), 160.

8. Hing-wah Chau, "Dangdai Zhongguo Jianzhu de Taolun: Wang Shu Jiaoshou Fangtan" ["Discussion of Contemporary Chinese Architecture: Interview with Prof. Wang Shu"] *HKIA Journal* 56 (2009): 93.

9. "Wa" means tiles, while "Pan" means pieces. Rafaël Magrou, "Focus on: Wang Shu," *Architecture d'aujourd'hui* 375 (Dec 2009-Jan 2010): 81.



In the Xiangshan Campus, more than seven million pieces of discarded roof tiles and bricks salvaged from various demolition sites were used,¹⁰ forming random patterns of bricks of different sizes, colours, and shapes on facades, and revitalizing traditional craftsmanship. When I. M. Pei designed the Fragrant Hill Hotel (1982) in Beijing, his main concern was also the continuity of Chinese architectural traditions.¹¹ However, the use of old tiles and bricks in the Xiangshan Campus was only one-tenth of the cost of new building materials,¹² achieving a relatively low construction cost;¹³ while in Pei's Fragrant Hill Hotel, the carefully-cut gray tiles on the facades were seventeen times higher than normal tiles used in vernacular houses.¹⁴ Compared to the extravagance of I. M. Pei, Wang's Xiangshan Campus exemplifies Chinese vernacular sustainable construction approach, and is a critique of the prevailing consumption phenomenon in society.

Liu's social response is most manifest after the Sichuan (四川) earthquake in 2008. Facing vast debris of the ruined areas awaiting for large-scale clean up, he proposed to use the remnants as a component to mix with cement and straw to produce light weight bricks, namely "Rebirth Brick." Since straw is abundant in rural villages especially during the harvesting season, while debris from damaged buildings can provoke the collective memory of the people, so the "Rebirth Brick" has a close connection to the residents not only physically but also psychologically and emotionally. Using simple machines and readily available resources, the "Rebirth Brick," without patent limitation, can be produced easily and quickly by local factories at low cost, facilitating re-establishment of small-scale industry and regeneration of the disaster zones, such as the reconstruction of the Dongping Village, Pengzhou (彭州市董坪村).

10. "Xiangshan Campus" *Lotus International* 141 (2010): 30.

11. Carter Wiseman, *I. M. Pei: A Profile in American Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 185.

12. Hua Xuan, "Jiang Xin Wang Shu" ["Wang Shu with a Heart of Craftsmanship"] *Xinwen Zhoukan* [*China Newsweek*], April 2, 2012, 66.

13. The construction cost of the Xiangshan Campus was maintained at around RMB¥ 2,000/m², approximately US\$300/m². Wang Shu, "Na Yi Tian" ["One Day"] *Shidai Jianzhu* [*Time + Architecture*] 4 (2005): 103.

14. Huang Mo, "Xiangshan Fandian Sheji de Deshi" [Merits and Shortcomings of Fragrant Hill Hotel] *Jianzhu Xuebao* [*Architectural Journal*] 4 (1983): 69.

15. Liu Jiakun, "Wo zai Xibu zuo Jianzhu"



Figure 1. Xiangshan Campus Phase II, Hangzhou (2007). Photograph by the author.

Liu's social responsibility can also be expressed by his Hu Huihan (胡慧姍) Memorial House (2008), which was built for an ordinary secondary school girl who died in the Sichuan earthquake. Being compassionate for the profound sorrow of a couple who had lost their only daughter in the devastating Sichuan earthquake, Liu initiated the idea of building a small memorial house at his own cost, and considered it as a personal act instead of other post-earthquake reconstruction schemes driven by government policies and commercial operations. Taking a common refugee tent as its prototype, the simple building form can arouse people's memory of the earthquake. Although the house is small in scale, for Liu, this is the most meaningful work of his professional career because "the concern for every single ordinary life is the foundation of revival of a nation."¹⁵ Owing to its sensitive correlation with the controversial collapse of school buildings in the earthquake, this memorial house is not allowed to be opened by the government; yet, it can still offer a critique provoking widespread public concern and discussion in society.

Ma? ["Am I practising Architecture in Western China?"] *Jintian Wenxue Zazhe* [*Today Literary Magazine*] 85 (2009 Summer): 91.

16. In the CCTV design competition, Yung

Urban Development and Revitalization

Urban development in China is sprawling at an accelerating speed and the connectivity of the existing city fabric is commonly interrupted by the erection of discrete iconic buildings. Chang's concern with the impact of building form on the urban context can be illustrated in his competition entry for the Central China Television (CCTV) Headquarters, Beijing (2002) in collaboration with Toyo Ito. Rather than offering a high-rise proposal similar to other entries, or adopting an iconic form such as Rem Koolhaas's winning design, the scheme by Chang and Ito was a low-rise

Figure 2. Hu Huihan Memorial House, Anren, Sichuan (2008). Photograph by the author.



solution to serve the city centre.¹⁶ Large-scale courtyards and gardens, as well as their integration with various programmes, not only satisfy the functional needs of CCTV, but also have an urban impact on the metropolis, providing breathing spaces to serve society at large. Chang opposes the erection of formally unique “object buildings” in the city,¹⁷ and challenges existing planning guidelines in China:

Concerning the direction of urban development, few questions or different voices have been raised, resulting in the collective unconsciousness of planning practice...the unconditional acceptance of existing planning guidelines, thus leading to the repetitive of certain urban qualities and even the reoccurrence of certain problems, such as object buildings which are environmentally confrontational and isolated¹⁸

The connectivity and program mixture of the urban fabric are far more important to Chang than individually expressive architecture. This is in line with Manfredo Tafuri’s comment against the architect as a mere producer of objects in the city,¹⁹ as well as Hilde Heynen’s following remark:

one of the most significant (if often neglected) contribution of the avant-garde impulse in architecture: that architecture is not just a highbrow discipline that occasionally informs the putting up of prestigious buildings, but that its ambition basically should have to do with the framing of everyday environments.²⁰

With an aim of enhancing the quality of public urban spaces, Chang deliberately minimizes the width of roads in his Jiading (嘉定) Advertisement Base, Shanghai, which is scheduled to be completed in 2014. He subdivides the land lots by a ten metre street grid and provides three-metre ground level setback around all sides of the blocks to form continuous pedestrian arcades in the whole site. A variety of programs will be provided, and the proportion of urban spaces and courtyards will be maintained for increasing the liveability and walkability of the urban environment.²¹

Similar to the provision of public access in Chang’s CCTV competition entry, Zhang’s Zhengdong (鄭東) District Urban Planning Exhibition Hall in Zhengzhou (鄭州, 2011) is a response to the prevalent lack of accessibility in public buildings in China, which are mainly focused on monumentality and external

Ho Chang and Toyo Ito received the second prize while Rem Koolhaas received the first prize. Hironori Matsubara, “Low-rise as New Symbol,” *Time + Architecture* 2 (2003): 42-44.

17. Yung Ho Chang, “City of Object a.k.a. City of Desire,” in *Totalstadt: Beijing Case*, ed. Gregor Jansen (Cologne: Walther König, 2006), 370-71.

18. Yung Ho Chang, “Phenomena and Relationships: A Hypothetical Reorganization of the First Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism/ Architecture, a Message passed to the Next Curator,” in *Chengshi, Kaimen!: 2005 Shoujie Shenzhen Chengshi/ Jianzhu Shuangnianzhan [City, Open Door!: The First Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism/ Architecture]* ed. Yung Ho Chang, (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 2007), 21-22.

19. Manfredo Tafuri, “Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology” (1969) in *Architecture Theory since 1968*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli and ed. K. Michael Hays (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 22.

20. Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*, 223.

21. Yung Ho Chang/ FCJZ, “Kongjian de Shijian” [“A Space-Making Practice”] *Shidai Jianzhu [Time + Architecture]* 1 (2012): 43.

Figure 3. Jiading Advertisement Base (under construction). Photograph by the author.



22. Zhang Lei and Guo Donghai, "Gonggong Jianzhu de Gonggongxing Shijian: Zhengzhou Zhengdong Xinqu Chengshi Guihua Zhanlanguan Sheji" ["Public Practice of Public Architecture: Design of Zhengzhou East District Urban Planning Exhibition Hall"] *Jianzhu Xuebao* [*Architectural Journal*] 3 (2011): 25.

23. Brendan McGetrick, "Ningbo Historic Museum," *Domus* 922 (Feb 2009): 74.

24. Bert de Muynck, "Local Hero," *Mark* 19 (Apr-May 2009): 74.

appearance.²² The Zhengdong Exhibition Hall highlights the public accessibility by providing a grand entry staircase. Bearing a passing resemblance to Koolhaas's Netherlands Embassy in Berlin (2003), the main circulation space is in a continuous spiral movement leading to the roof terrace. The succession of steps, landings, and corridors of various widths and heights gives visitors a stimulating meandering experience. The permeability of building facades, clad by translucent glass panels along the spiral path, enables visitors to have a glimpse of the surrounding cityscape, which is complementary to the exhibitions inside in relation to the city.

Wang's Ningbo History Museum is also a critique of the speedy urbanization in China. Located in a new development district of Ningbo, the site of the museum is criticized by him as a "no memory area," because all previous old villages there have already been razed.²³ He comments on the planning of the district as a bad development approach of just providing wide roads and big squares ignoring the historical context, and setting a limit of building density neglecting the vast population reality in China.²⁴ Through the transformation of the rectangular base of the museum into five separate architectural units on top of a viewing platform, he brings an urban dimension to his architecture, resembling traditional streetscape by maintaining the proportion of the space in-between. The viewing platform provides a panoramic view of Ningbo city and numerous construction works around. Viewing the cityscape in close proximity to the historical fragments of the building facades can stimulate visitors to have a reflection on the massive demolition of the urban fabric and the future development direction of the city.





Figure 4. Zhengdong District Urban Planning Exhibition Hall, Zhengzhou (2011). Courtesy of Zheng Lei.

Apart from the Ningbo History Museum, the Zhongshan (中山) Road Revitalization in Hangzhou (2009) is also an opportunity for Wang to explore the direction of city development. Contrary to the common *tabula rasa* approach, Wang reiterates the importance of the existing urban fabric, and has successfully convinced the local government to revitalize the old Hangzhou city centre along Zhongshan Road without massive demolition. He strongly criticizes the conventional urban planning approach of providing roads as wide as forty to sixty metres, which is “impossible for the formation of city life.”²⁵ In order to maintain the proportion of urban spaces and historical buildings on both sides, he insisted to reduce the width of Zhongshan Road from twenty-four metres, as recommended by urban planners, to twelve metres.²⁶ In addition to preserving the existing physical urban fabric, another merit of this revitalization work is to allow original residents to continue to stay without relocation. This requires an extensive field survey of the old community, deviating from the normal profit-oriented commercial development approach. This can be an exemplar of an alternative way of urban development and revitalization in China.

Housing and Resettlement

Housing is a common social issue in contemporary China, especially due to the massive urbanization nowadays. Chang’s Qingxi (清溪) Hillside Housing proposal in Guangdong Province (1995) was an early attempt in this aspect. Against the phenomenon of extensive villa development resulting in an ineffective use of valuable land resources,²⁷ the introverted

25. Wang Shu, “Zhongshan Road,” *Lotus International* 141 (2010): 109.

26. Magrou, “Focus on: Wang Shu,” 59.

27. Yung Ho Chang, “Qingxi Podi Zhuzhaiqun: Huo Meiguo Di 43 Jie ‘Jinbu Jianzhu’ Jiang Zuopin” [“Qingxi Hillside Housing: Receiving the 43th Progressive Architecture Citation Award”] *Shiji Jianzhu [World Architecture]* 2 (1996): 57.

Figure 5. Zhongshan Road Revitalisation, Hangzhou (2009). Photograph by the author.



courtyard design of the Qingxi Housing can enable residential units to be attached together to create a higher density living environment, and at the same time, allow residents to live in close proximity to outdoor activity spaces.

As the Head of the Department of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology,²⁸ Chang, together with his colleagues, led “1K House” design studio in 2009, which required students to design affordable houses at a unit cost of barely one thousand US dollars. Apart from catering for victims of natural disasters, this is also a proactive way, under a concerted effort of an interdisciplinary team, to address world poverty by empowering impoverished people to participate in regional revitalization through housing construction. Under the three fundamental principles of affordability, liveability and sustainability,²⁹ the first “1K House,” namely the Pinwheel House, was erected in Sichuan Province, China in 2011.³⁰ The duplication and rotation of basic units simplify the construction process, while the courtyard facilitates natural ventilation and lighting. Different configurations and clusters of modular units and courtyards can cultivate community living and the sense of neighbourhood among residents.

Compared to Chang’s low-rise courtyard design of the Qingxi Housing, Wang’s Vertical Apartments in Hangzhou (2007) is a housing experiment with a much higher density.³¹ Contrary to the homogenized appearance of ordinary residential towers, the

28. Yung Ho Chang was the Head of the Department of Architecture, MIT from 2005 to 2010.

29. “MIT’s ‘1K House’ Project: Affordable Housing for the World” MIT Centre for Real Estate, <http://web.mit.edu/cre/research/1k-house-project.html> (accessed on June 30 2012).

30. The “Pinwheel House” was designed by the student, Ying Chee Chui in the “1K House” design studio led by Yung Ho Chang, Tong Ciochetti, and Dennis Shelden in 2009 at MIT. “Housing the Victims of Natural Disaster: A Prototype of the 1K House recently built in China,” *Plan: Review of the MIT School of Architecture and Planning* 80 (Dec 2011), <http://sap.mit.edu/resources/portfolio/1khouse/> (accessed June 30, 2012).

31. Wang Shu, “‘Zhongguoshi Zhuzhai’ de Kenengxing: Wang Shu he Ta de Yanjiushengmen de Duihua” [“Possibilities of ‘Chinese-Style Housing’: A Dialogue between Wang Shu and his Students”] *Shidai Jianzhu [Time + Architecture]* 3 (2006): 36-41.



Vertical Apartments seem to be formed by stacking two-storey dwellings with balconies on top of one another to create a stronger sense of identity. The provision of communal spaces, shared among residents within the apartments, can foster social interaction.

Urban resettlement is another widespread social problem in China due to extensive demolition. Zhang tackles this challenge in his Guangfu (廣福) Garden Residential Resettlement, Yangzhou (揚州), which is now under construction. Guangfu Garden is a community establishment with the provision of amenities for the residents. This shares a close resemblance to the Siedlung Praunheim, Frankfurt (1926-28), which was the first experimental housing estate by Ernst May.³² Since CIAM 2 was held in Frankfurt in 1929 under the theme of “Housing for Minimum Income Groups,” Siedlung Praunheim became a showcase for realizing the social response to the housing need at that time. Referring to the inaugural La Sarraz Declaration (1928) of the CIAM, architecture was perceived as a social art, and architects had to carry out their professional obligations towards society.³³ In Guangfu Garden, Zhang’s design strategy is different from conventional housing resettlement approach. Through questionnaires, he first collected relevant information for setting design parameters to cope with the needs and living habits of the residents. After realizing that a majority of the inhabitants are aged people, apart from the provision of aged-care centres, other appropriate facilities and outdoor amenities will be provided to suit the needs of the elderly. Venues for local customs and religious ceremonies will also be accommodated for the continuity of living folk traditions.

32. D W Dreyse, *Ernst May Housing Estates: Architectural Guide to Eight New Frankfurt Estates 1926-1930*. am Main: trans. Patricia Grossmann (Frankfurt am Main: Fricke Verlag, 1988), 7-12.

33. “CIAM: La Sarraz Declaration” (1928) in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-century Architecture*, Eng. trans. Michael Bullock and ed. Ulrich Conrads (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 109-113.



Fig. 6 Guangfu Garden Residential Resettlement, Yangzhou (under construction). Courtesy of Zhang Lei

Conclusion

Frankly speaking, not all the projects and works of these four Chinese architects are socially responsive in nature. Yet, through the above analysis, their social critiques and responses in response to massive demolition and destruction, urban development and revitalization, as well as housing and resettlement can be illustrated. Compared to the collective production of state-owned design institutes in the past following official ideology or the complete immersion in numerous real-estate development projects for maximum profit after the economic reform, Chang, Liu, Wang, and Zhang represent the emergence of a new generation of Chinese architects with social responsibilities. Apart from the development of their own formal languages, they are also interested in exploring the social role of architecture. Sharing a family of resemblance of social agendas, they, arguably, have made a historical breakthrough in the development of Chinese architecture.

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