

Negotiation Across Cultural Distance: The Creation and Interpretation of a “Chinese-Style” Christian Campus

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For Europeans, China has long been in the imagination of remote fantasies. The seventeenth century and the following eras of colonialism witnessed a lasting interest among Western architects in designing Chinese-style buildings. These either represented historical and geographical “distance” or – if built for Chinese audiences – a putative “familiarity.”

The campus of West China Union University (Chengdu, China) was among the Chinese-style projects designed by Western architects in the early twentieth century. To facilitate local acceptance of this institution, British architect Fred Rowntree took great pains in combining Chinese architectural elements with Western principles and technology, with meanings encoded in the buildings. The meaning of the buildings was then interpreted in various ways by people from different socio-cultural backgrounds. Some enthusiastic Western donors claimed the buildings as beautiful monuments of the “remote” Chinese culture, while interpretations by Chinese people varied from elegant hybrids of the two architectures to crystallised symbols of cultural imperialism. The discordant interpretations not only challenged the original purposes and intentions of the architect, but also raised the question as to how architectural meanings are perceived in cross-cultural contexts.

This paper discusses the architecture of West China Union University and the cultural distance reflected through its design and interpretation. Informed by semiotic theories, this paper proposes the construction of architectural meaning as a negotiation where the diverse interpretations competed with each other (and with the architect’s intention) before reaching a balance. A dynamic framework is thus adopted to unfold the complexity and contradiction in architectural meaning across cultural distance.

Keywords: cultural difference; Chinese architecture; semiotics; post-colonialism

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During the early twentieth century, China went through turbulent times. The political environment of China changed greatly with the collapse of Qing Dynasty and the foundation of the Republic of China in 1912. In this period, thirteen Christian universities were established in China by Western missionaries serving two purposes: to provide Chinese people with modern education as part of their philanthropic project, and to promote Christianity discretely in a way overcoming the tension between Western missionaries and Chinese people caused by overt proselytising.¹

¹ Dong Li, *Zhongguo Jindai Jiaohui Daxue Jianzhushi Yanjiu [Architectural History of Christian Universities in Modern China]* (Beijing: Kexue Chubanshe, 2010), 24-25.

West China Union University (WCUU), founded in 1910 by Western missionaries, was among the earliest Christian universities. Located in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province in the interior of China, it faced the strongest hostility toward Western missionaries. When constructing the campus, the cautious university authorities decided to adopt an architectural style combining Chinese and Western elements. These buildings suffered less destruction than other Christian buildings in Sichuan, and as a result of a perception that this was a possible outcome of the adopted hybrid style, this architectural strategy was followed by later Christian universities. Soon after the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, WCUU was converted to a national university operated by the government while nevertheless keeping much of its existing institutional character. After ninety years of success, the university was forced to merge with Sichuan University in 2000, and its campus taken over by the latter. Today, although most of the buildings are still used for the same purposes as previously, the meaning of these buildings is not the same as a century ago.

WCUU exemplified Western architects' effort to adapt and represent Oriental architecture for Oriental audiences, which was observed not only in China, but also in other parts of colonial Asia. Parallel cases include works in the Dutch East Indies such as the Institute of Technology at Bandung, designed by Dutch architect Henri Maclaine Pont with indigenous Javanese architectural features, and so-called "Indo-Saracenic" architecture in India such as Robert Chisholm's Madras University Senate. In these buildings, architecture was used as a means of communication between a university client and a group of target audiences.

When studying the buildings at WCUU, two levels of questions are raised. Firstly, how did the architect manipulate architectural symbols to design meaning *into* architecture? Besides, in a cross-cultural context different groups of people with different cultural

backgrounds—the Western missionaries, Chinese students, faculty members from both backgrounds, and local villagers—derived diverse meanings from the buildings. Therefore, the second level of questions are: were the architectural meanings interpreted in the way envisioned by the designers? How effective was this architectural communication?

To answer these questions, this paper adopts a framework drawing on semiotics—the theory of signs and meaning. It was first introduced to the discipline of architecture in the 1960s and received wide discussion, among which Umberto Eco’s theoretical contribution is now recalled again by architectural historians and critics when discussing the contexts of architecture’s interpretation.² Eco not only acknowledges the contribution of the “audience”—in addition to the author (which may refer to the architect)—in the production of meaning, but also attributes the meaning of a sign or a text (which may include building) to social and cultural conventions manifest in a cultural work. In this regard, Eco refers to the “intention of the work” as well as the “intention of the author” and the “intention of the reader.”³ In Eco’s semiotic theory, as the formation of meaning is attributed to social and cultural conventions, changes in meaning may be explained by the cultural difference and the change of social context. For analytical purposes the construction of meaning can be divided into two stages: the preliminary production of meaning by the architect, and the revision of meaning by the interpreters after the building’s erection. These are both culturally constrained; their fidelity to the “intention of the work” is a reflection of this constraint. His observation suggests an inclusive and dynamic framework for analysing the buildings in WCUU. Also drawing on the work of architectural historians examining similarly cross-cultural topics, this paper proposes the construction of architectural meaning as a *negotiation* which involves the architect and also the audiences of the architect’s work.

2 Justine Clark and Paul Walker, “Negotiating the Intention of the Work,” *Volume 36*, no. 1 (2013): 25.

3 Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 24–25.

West China Union University: Building Meaning into a Christian Campus

When the protestant missionaries manoeuvred their way to Sichuan Province in the late nineteenth century, they saw both great opportunities and unprecedented risks in the then largest province of southwest China. They were faced with a population of more than ten million people that could be Christianised,⁴ but this population was engaged in incessant anti-Christian riots which damaged or destroyed church property.⁵ To extend

4 Young People’s Forward Movement, *Our West China Mission: Being a Somewhat Extensive Summary by the Missionaries on the Field of Work During the First Twenty-five Years of the Canadian in the Province of Szechwan, Western China* (Miami: HardPress Publishing, 2012), 68–69.

5 Young People’s Forward Movement, *Our West China Mission*, 42–43.

their power discreetly in this land, missionaries therefore built not only churches, but also schools and hospitals providing philanthropic medical and educational services. The necessity of higher educational institutions emerged when the missionaries realised their influence on the upper classes of China was limited. In 1908, the proposal to establish a university in Sichuan was approved by four collaborating mission groups: the Friends' Foreign Mission Association (Britain), the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society (U.S.A.), the Methodist Episcopal Mission (U.S.A.), and the Canadian Methodist Mission (Canada). To be located in Chengdu—the capital of Sichuan Province—the university aimed at the “advancement of the Kingdom of God, by means of higher education in West China.”⁶

Probably because of wariness of previous experiences of local riots, adaptation was made to the special conditions of West China. The missionaries declared their institution to be a “Chinese university.” While English was used in other Christian universities in the coastal cities of China, all teaching at WCUU was in Chinese language (more precisely the Chengdu dialect).⁷ When constructing the campus, instead of pure Chinese or

6 Constitution of the West China Union University, January 1910, Archives of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, Research Group 11, Box 272, Folder 4316, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven.

7 Lewis C. Walmsley, *West China Union University* (North Newton: Mennonite Press, Inc., 1974), 18-30.

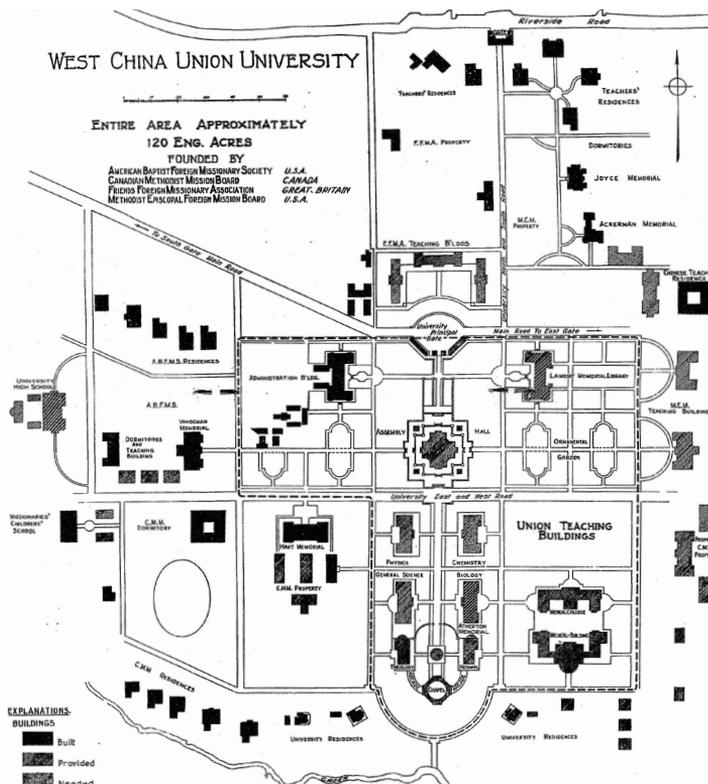
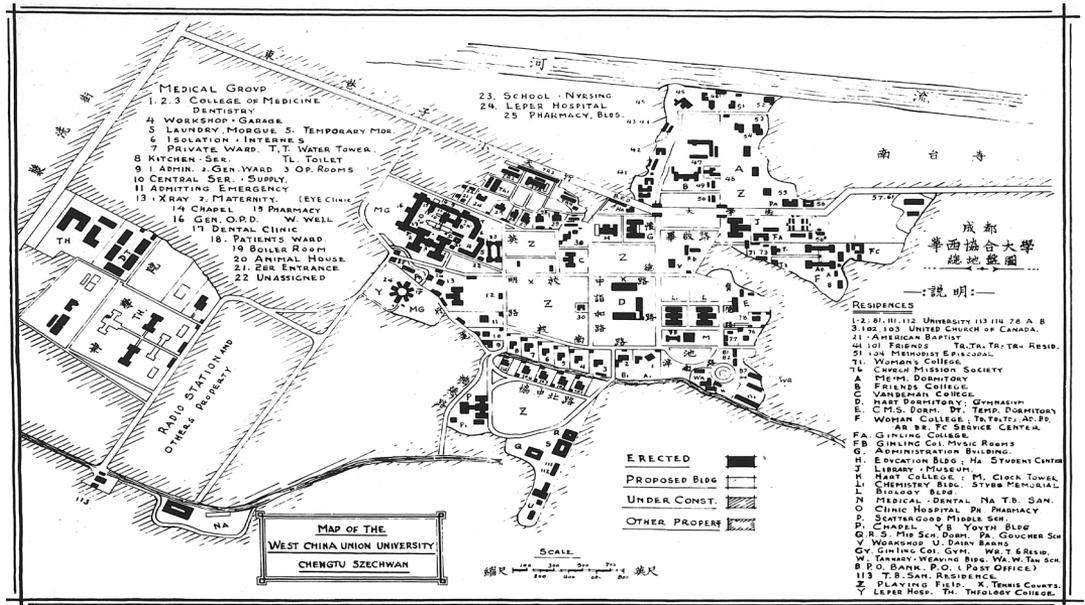


Figure 1. Proposed Master Plan of West China Union University, 1921. (Courtesy of the Archives of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia.)



Western architecture, a combination of the two was preferred by the WCUU authorities as a balance of function, cost, and beauty. While the missionaries considered Western construction would be preferable to local building practices, a Chinese exterior to the university buildings would not only “make the Chinese feel at home,”⁸ but also be a conciliatory gesture to the local people, reducing the risk of the buildings being destroyed in riots as had previously occurred to Christian premises.

As the result of a competition, British architect Fred Rowntree was commissioned the University Architect. Rowntree had never visited China before and was influenced in his works by the Arts and Crafts Movement during his career. His design for WCUU featured a combination of two distant cultures. This combination was initially reflected through the accommodation of “Chinese style buildings” in a campus planned in a completely Western scheme.

The original plan of West China Union University reflects Western planning and design conventions of the period (fig. 1). According to the University authorities, each mission group was to construct its own college with both residential and educational functions, while a group of teaching and administration buildings were shared.⁹ This scheme formed the basic structure of Rowntree’s plan: all the shared buildings were set along two perpendicular axes at the centre of the site, surrounded by college groups of each mission beyond.¹⁰ What appear to be Beaux-Arts campus planning strategies,

Figure 2. Map of West China Union University, 1937. (Courtesy of the Archives of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia.)

8 Report of Drawings Submitted in Competition Design for West China Union University, Chengtu, Szechuan, October 9, 1912, Box 296, Folder 4617, Archives of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, Research Group 11, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven.

9 Young People’s Forward Movement, *Our West China Mission*, 361.

10 Fred Rowntree and Sons, “West China Union University,” *Builder* 126, no. 11 (June 1924): 1024.

interestingly, were applied in the British architect's plan. Firstly, Rowntree adopted the Beaux-Arts concept of grand monumental planning employing *axiality*: a University Gateway, an Assembly Hall and a University Chapel (later replaced by a Clock Tower) were aligned on the main north/south axis, with ten significant buildings disposed symmetrically along its sides.¹¹ Secondly, free-standing individual buildings, rather than quadrangles which were common in traditional British collegiate planning, formed the basic unit of the campus. According to American architect Richard Dober, this approach has been a fashion of American campus planning since the 1890s, when "buildings enclosing space" were replaced by "buildings sitting in space."¹² No Chinese spatial strategies were referred to in Rowntree's explanation of his campus planning.¹³

However, the original plan was subject to major changes during the construction. In the 1937 campus map, barely any symmetrical disposition of buildings can be identified (fig. 2). Funding, of course, was one of the problems, but the key reason was in the difficulty of purchasing the lands envisaged in the original plan. In particular, purchasing grave lands was the most challenging, as the missionaries were not only required to secure new sites for reburying the remains from the old graves, but were also blamed by local villagers for disturbing the spirits of their ancestors.¹⁴ Despite all the efforts, unfortunately, the missionaries failed to secure all the intended lands, especially a wedge-shaped area of land east of the campus which compromised the whole symmetrical layout. The fence of the university was also demolished by local people in a riot in 1930, and the campus has been left open ever since. Nevertheless, not all changes were negative. Probably with the purpose to promote Chinese taste on campus, a semicircular pond of lotus was added to the south of the Clock Tower during the 1930s, while a long rectangular pond was built to its north, with two Chinese stone bridges over it. The ponds created a classical scene characteristic of Chinese poems, and soon became popular among students.¹⁵ As Rowntree died in 1927, these might be the work of Walter G. Small, the University Builder from 1925, who was familiar with Chinese culture. As a result, the final plan of the campus turned out to be a negotiation of Western planning principles, the site conditions of Chengdu, and later attempts to re-introduce Chinese-ness into the campus.

Unlike the campus planning, the architecture of WCUU was supposed to combine the finest elements of Chinese and Western architecture. According to Rowntree, the architectural design for WCUU aimed at maintaining "the forms, texture and colouring

11 Jeffrey W. Cody, "American Geometries and the Architecture of Christian Campuses in China," in *China's Christian Colleges: Cross-Cultural Connections 1900-1950*, ed. Daniel H. Bays and Ellen Widmer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 29-32.

12 Richard Dober, *Campus Planning* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1964), 32-34.

13 Dong, *Zhongguo Jindai Jiaohui Daxue Jianzhushi Yanjiu*, 71.

14 Walmsley, *West China Union University*, 34.

15 Jin Kaitai, *Huaxiba Wenhua: Huaxi Xiehe Daxue Houzhong De Lishi Chendian* [*Huaxiba Culture: the History of West China Union University*] (Beijing: Zhongguo Wenhua Chubanshe, 2016), 73-75.

handed down from the past history” of China and adapting these to modern requirements.¹⁶ Rowntree visited China in 1913, during which he studied the indigenous architecture of west China while completing the detailed drawings for WCUU buildings. Three design strategies could be identified from the buildings of WCUU:

- (1) Applying Chinese roofs to all of the buildings;
- (2) Adopting and appropriating Chinese building prototypes, especially the pagoda and the gateway;
- (3) Manipulating a variety of Chinese decorative details, sometimes combined with Western ones.

Firstly, the widely applied Chinese roof was the dominant feature of the campus. All of the buildings were topped by a hip-and-gable roof with characteristic curves at the corners. This represented the common view of Chinese architecture among Western architects at the beginning of twentieth century.¹⁷ Moreover, all of the roofs were covered with Chinese clay tiles inscribed with the Chinese name of the university, and

16 Rowntree, “West China Union University,” 1026.

17 Sir Banister Fletcher, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method: For Students, Craftsmen, and Amateurs*, Sixth Edition (London: Batsford, 1921), 809.

Figure 3. Top. Dormer. Bottom. The “Karahafu” eave. (Photographs by Yinrui Xie).



decorated with a variety of sculptures symbolising the animals sacred in Chinese culture, coloured red, yellow, and green—all typical “Chinese” colours. However, in order to satisfy modern functions, the Chinese roofs were combined with elements from Western architecture. In the Administration Building, for example, two dormers were introduced to allow natural light for the first floor. Rowntree’s design also indicated influence from the Arts and Crafts Movement. He introduced the Japanese “*Karahafu*” eaves, which featured a wave-shaped curve in the middle of the eaves, to most of the Chinese roofs.¹⁸ The “*Karahafu*” form—intimating the Arts and Crafts interest in Japanese art—appeared at the main façade of all the buildings alongside the proposed axis of the campus (fig. 3).

18 Dong, *Zhongguo Jindai Jiaohui Daxue Jianzhushi Yanjiu*, 88.

Rowntree’s second strategy was to appropriate prototypes from Chinese architecture—especially the pagoda and the gateway. In Chinese architecture, a pagoda was always a free-standing building, but in Rowntree’s design for WCUU this rule was broken, with the prototype of Chinese pagoda appearing in two ways. In the first, the pagoda was replicated as a whole, then combined with other parts of the building, for instance in Ackerman Memorial College, where a five-storey pagoda was erected at the corner of the building to connect two wings. Secondly, simplified pagoda elements appeared as attachments to the roofs. In Vandeman Memorial College, a two storey-pagoda rose from the roof as a roof lantern, while a huge octagonal “pagoda-lantern” was put on the top of the Dental Clinic. Similarities were identified between the “pagodas” in WCUU and the potential prototypes in the local city of Chengdu, such as *Wang Jiang Lou* (River Overseeing Pavilion) and *Wan Fo Lou* (Ten Thousand Buddha Pavilion).¹⁹ Another prototype, the Chinese gateway, was also widely imitated. The University Gate itself was a brick gateway; more creatively, in Vandeman Memorial College, a gateway was attached to the façade, emphasising the main entrance of the building. The gateways featured triple gates—a main gate accompanied by two smaller ones. It represented an architectural sign existing in both Western and Chinese architecture, usually symbolic of solemnity and dignity.²⁰ It was also noteworthy that these gateways all had round arches which was uncommon in traditional Chinese gateways. This was perceived as referring to the Western triumphal arch in some local interpretation.²¹

19 Luo Zhaotian, *Dongfang De Xifang: Huaxi Daxue Laojianzhu [West in East: Quaker Buildings in West China Union University]* (Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe, 2018), 95-97.

20 Luo, *Dongfang De Xifang*, 128-29.

21 Jin, *Huaxiba Wenhua*, 67.

Rowntree used not only Chinese building forms but also ornamental details. To decorate the ridges and the *Dougong* brackets of the Chinese roof as was often done in Chinese architecture, a great range of mythological creatures and animals



Figure 4. The decoration of Vandeman Hall. (Photographs by Yinrui Xie.)

were selected, even if some were imported from the Western world. For example, the roof of Vandeman Memorial Hall was decorated with not only fishes, dragons and phoenixes which were common in Chinese architecture, but also bats, lions, crocodiles, peacocks, and even elephants which were alien, if not ridiculous in the eyes of Chinese people (fig. 4). The Administration Building and Lamont Memorial Library feature similar hybrid decorative elements.

Some claimed that Rowntree was only making fun of these signs, playing a semiotic game without following the rules,²² while the others praised the creativity reflected by these juxtapositions and combinations, as well as the vitality they brought to the campus.²³

For the university authorities, the buildings of WCUU met their purpose to please both the Westerners and the Chinese,

²² Dong, *Zhongguo Jindai Jiaohui Daxue Jianzhushi Yanjiu*, 89.

²³ Yang Bingde, *Zhongguo Jindai Zhongxi Jianzhu Wenhua Jiaorongshi* [*The Combination History of Sino-West Architectural Culture in Modern Times of China*] (Wuhan: Hubei Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2003), 271.

with messages to be delivered to different audiences. For the Western audiences, the combinational style was supposed to symbolise the localisation of Christian faith, while for the local Chinese people, the Chinese appearance of the buildings was expected to demonstrate that “the university would be a Chinese university.”²⁴ In a semiotic point of view, these buildings not only contained a variety of “signs,” but themselves became “texts” in which the meanings of signs were interwoven to convey more complicated messages. This was achieved by the efforts of the architect, through the manipulation of his reading of conventionalised codes from certain cultures. However, the appropriateness of these readings may vary according to the degree of the architect’s cultural submersion and may also change through time. Considering the culture differences lying between different groups of people, the “interpreted” architectural meaning of the WCUU buildings should also be explored from the interpreters’ side.

24 Walmsley, *West China Union University*, 18.

The Interpretation of West China Union University

As part of the process of meaning negotiation, the interpretation of the WCUU campus involves groups of audiences with various social and cultural backgrounds. These audiences include the university authorities, the Western donors, scholars and upper classes from both China and the West, and most importantly, local students and residents. Interpretation varies from one to another, and together, these interpretations in turn have influenced the meanings the buildings bear, revising the original meaning through a long process of negotiation.

The unique Oriental-Western style of West China Union University seems to have been satisfying for the Western clients, which also extends to current descendants of the missionaries today. In the official historical sketch of the university published in the US in 1974, it was said the new architectural style of WCUU’s buildings combined the best features of Western and Chinese architecture with a sense of unity and harmony.²⁵ This view was also expressed in some English language newspapers in China, including the *China Press* (1926) and the *North-China Herald* (1934).²⁶ In 1934, the University President, Joseph Beech, proudly announced in an article that visitors called the university the “Garden of Eden” or the “Western Heaven,” compared to the city of Chengdu which was termed the “Eastern Hell.”²⁷ Today, the campus and its buildings still have meaning for the descendants of the missionaries. The article by Beech mentioned above is available on a website established by the

25 Walmsley, *West China Union University*, 35.

26 “Science Teaching is Helping to Develop China’s Leaders,” *The China Press*, May 9, 1926; F. Dickinson, “Rural Life Reconstruction – Szechuen under an Enlightened Ruler: Work of the Western Union University in Chengtu,” *The North-China Herald*, August 29, 1934, 331.

27 Joseph Beech, “The University Beginnings: A Story of the West China Union University,” *The Journal of the West China Boarder Research Society*, no. 6 (1934): 95.

Beech family along with photographs including one of Beech family members visiting the WCUU campus in 2010 for its 100th anniversary.²⁸ Similarly, a website on the architect, Fred Rowntree, established by family members, suggests West China Union University was the most important project during his career.²⁹ Andrew George, great-great-grandson of Fred Rowntree, visited the old WCUU campus in 2018 to retrace the steps of his ancestor and gifted Rowntree's original drawings to Sichuan University.³⁰

Unlike the nearly consistent attitudes of the Western clients toward the buildings of WCUU, scholars from both China and the West developed interpretations very different from each other. No direct comment on the architecture of WCUU has been found among Western professionals or scholars, but their wider interest in this unique architectural style might be observed from the fact that Rowntree's architectural drawings of WCUU were exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1924, and three articles on this project were published in two of the key architectural journals in Britain (*The Builder* in 1915 and 1924; *The Architect* in 1920 and 1922).³¹ These offer no negative comments. No comment from Chinese scholars was found before the 1940s, but serious criticism occurs since 1944, when Liang Sicheng, a leading scholar in traditional Chinese architecture, argued that the architecture of Christian campuses in China, especially that of West China Union University, did no more than simply impose Chinese roofs on Western buildings.³² This commentary was followed by contemporary scholars Yang Bingde and Dong Li, with the former claiming the design skill of these Western architects as far behind their Chinese contemporaries, while the latter argues that Rowntree played a random architectural "game" with Chinese and Western symbols.³³ Nevertheless, they all acknowledge the pioneering contribution of the architecture of China's Christian universities, including West China Union University, in expressing Chinese-ness with modern building techniques.

As the main target audience, the interpretation by Chinese students and local people is a major indicator of the effectiveness of architectural communication at WCUU. But more than this, students and local residents have assigned new meanings to the buildings based on their cultural backgrounds and everyday experiences on campus, interwoven with and sometimes overwriting the original meaning of the buildings. Among all the buildings on campus, the interpretation of the Clock Tower is the clearest instance of this. Though it was covered with Chinese roofs, the somewhat strange shape and proportions

28 Ed Sea, "Beech Family Visits Presidents House at University of Sichuan on Campus of West China University of Medical Sciences," Joseph and Miriam Beech: The Founding of West China Union University, accessed August 14, 2018, <http://www.beechchinawest.com/2010/10/08/beeched-family-visits-presidents-house-at-university-of-sichuan-on-campus-of-west-china-university-of-medical-sciences/>

29 "Pictures and Documents Relating to Chengtu University: West China University, Chengtu, Szechwan," History Website for Dibdin, Aglio, Rowntree, Guise, and other Families, accessed August 14, 2018, <http://www.guise.me.uk/gallery/rowntree/chengtu/chengtu.htm>

30 Hayley Jarvis, "Sichuan mission sends Andrew back to his roots," Brunel University London, accessed March 15, 2018, <https://www.brunel.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/articles/Sichuan-mission-sends-Andrew-back-to-his-roots>.

31 Fred Rowntree and Son, "West China Union University, Chengtu, China," *Builder* 109 (July 1915): 50; Rowntree, "West China Union University," 1021-27; Fred Rowntree and Sons, "West China Union University, Chengtu, Sze-chuan, China," *Architect (London)* 103 (February 1920): 119-20; Fred Rowntree and Sons, "Portico of the Administration Building, West China Union University, Chengtu, China," *Architect (London)* 107 (June 1922): 476.

32 Liang Sicheng, *Zhongguo Jianzhushi [Architectural History in China]* (Tianjin: Baihua Wenyi Chubanshe, 1998), 353-54.

33 Yang, *Zhongguo Jindai Zhongxi Jianzhu Wenhua Jiaorongshi*, 260; Dong, *Zhongguo Jindai Jiaohui Daxue Jianzhushi Yanjiu*, 83.



Figure 5. *Top*. Clock Tower on video. Courtesy of Deng Changchun. *Bottom*. Clock Tower on the National Weather Forecast program. Courtesy of Yang Guangxi, Chengdu Shi Wenhua Dibiao: Huaxiba Zhonglou [Cultural Icon of Chengdu: the Clock Tower at WCUU], accessed May 27, 2019, <http://www.myhxf.org/documents/dibiao-zonglou.htm>.

34 Shi Ming, “Shangdi De Jiezuo: Wo Xinmu Zhong De Huaxiba [God’s Masterpiece: WCUU in My Eyes],” accessed May 27, 2019, <http://www.myhxf.org/documents/shangdi&huaxi.htm>

35 Chengdu Deng Changchun, interview, June 12, 2018.

made it “Gothic” to the students from its erection in 1926.³⁴ In Rowntree’s earlier design, there was no free-standing clock tower: a pagoda-like clock tower was put on top of the southern gate of the University which resembled a Chinese city gate. Although the building plan for the southern gate was abandoned later, this composition was maintained and revised for the design of an independent clock tower. The slenderness of the whole structure compared to traditional Chinese city gates, as well as the clock appearing on its elevation which reminded Chinese people of a Gothic church, might explain the strangeness of this building felt by Chinese students. However, after two lotus ponds were built near the tower in 1932, this place started to become a popular site for dating, especially on nights when the tower was bathed in moonlight. Also in the 1930s, the students of WCUU named “Eight Famous Scenes” of the campus, among which “*Zhonglou Yingyue* (The Clock Tower in the Moonlight)” was ranked the most famous one.³⁵ The once “Gothic” tower, thus, began to be interpreted as a symbol of romance in the eyes of students. In 1954, a Chinese architect was commissioned to renovate the tower, altering the design of the roof, making it less “Gothic” and more harmonious with other buildings on campus.

Fortunately, the Clock Tower survived the Cultural Revolution in the following decade, and gradually became an icon of WCUU with poems and articles dedicated to it by students and staffs praising its beauty.³⁶ Today, the iconic tower has even become a symbol of the city of Chengdu where the campus is located. China Central Television's National Weather Forecast Program, an influential TV program among Chinese people, once used a photograph of the Clock Tower to represent Chengdu (fig. 5). Other campus buildings feature in stories and recollections shared on the website of Friends of WCUU, established by a group of alumni and local people voluntarily. After one hundred years of incessant interpretation by the students and local residents, for the campus and buildings of WCUU, their original meanings are now mingled with various new ones.

36 Yang Guangxi, "Chengdu Shi Wenhua Dibiao: Huaxiba Zhonglou [Cultural Icon of Chengdu: the Clock Tower at WCUU]," accessed May 27, 2019, <http://www.myhxf.org/documents/dibiao-zonglou.htm>.

The meaning transition at WCUU shows that interpretation is more than the reception of architecture meaning—sometimes it revises the preliminary meaning. The audiences, especially the students of WCUU, managed to revise and extend the meaning embedded in the buildings such as the Clock Tower, contributing to the localisation of the campus. Moreover, according to Eco, when a code that correlates the expression and the content planes of a sign is socially constructed, a layer of meaning is formed.³⁷ Thus certain layers of meaning may also change when the social context changes. Interestingly, the campus and buildings of WCUU experienced a stable accumulation of meaning over the past century, without obvious meaning loss. In other words, the preliminary meanings intended by the architect and clients are still well acknowledged by interpreters after one hundred years, despite the vicissitudes of social environments. It was probably due to the continuous existence of the WCUU as an independent institution until the year 2000, and the alumni's incessant effort to record and publicise the history of the campus.

37 Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976), 57.

Conclusion

Buildings bear and demonstrate meaning. At West China Union University, the buildings were expected to perform as a medium to communicate messages through architectural signs. This process is explored within three key contexts. Firstly, the role of the interpreter of meaning is acknowledged. More precisely, the reaction of audiences is regarded as a factor to test the effectiveness of architectural communication. The second context lies in the cultural difference between the participants in the architectural communication. In short, the situation in WCUU

was that a Western-trained architect without much knowledge of Chinese architecture was commissioned to design a campus in Chinese style, whose target audience—interestingly—was also Chinese. What would happen to its meaning when an architectural sign was introduced into a new cultural context, and then re-introduced back to the original culture? Last but not least is the issue of time. Buildings change through time, together with the people who apprehend their meaning and the social context in which interpretation takes place. How could this be reflected in the analysis of architectural meaning?

Based on Eco's semiotic theory, this research developed a framework of meaning formation comprising two stages. In the preliminary stage, the architect, Rowntree, used conventions extant in the Western world, by which the curved roof, the pagoda and the gateway were coded as "representatives" for Chinese architecture. These codes were understandable for people from both Western and Chinese culture, but when combined with other codes, such as those from Western architecture or Christianity, the sense of Rowntree's design evaded local audiences. The "intention of the work" was, we could say, not strong. When the audiences try to decode the meaning of an unfamiliar sign imported from another culture, the formation of new codes begins.

In the second stage—the revision of meaning, the meaning of the buildings in WCUU has been influenced and revised by the diverse interpretations from a variety of audiences since erection. In this stage, the audiences of the buildings take over the role from the architect in the long-term process of meaning construction. In different historical eras, various audiences derived diverse meanings for the campus. In the early years it was a symbol of the educational ideals of the university for the missionaries, a place both familiar and alien for the local students, and a great educational centre in the eyes of the local government; then it became a remnant of the Cultural Imperialism for the new government, while indigenised by the efforts of the students and local people to be a campus more Chinese in taste; today, it is regarded as a monument of their ancestry and a symbol of the long-lasting friendship between China and the West for the descendants of the missionaries, a group of historical buildings of great value by the current government, and even a cultural symbol of the city of Chengdu. All of the interpreted meanings contribute to the revision of the original meaning of the buildings, resulting in a complex hybrid where multiple layers of meaning from various audiences and historical stages are merged together.