

EDITORIAL

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# In commemoration of Liang Sicheng (1901 ~ 1972)

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As a graduate student in my twenties, I had consulted mimeograph copy *History of Chinese architecture*, and the classics like ‘Why is the Research of Chinese Architecture’ in the *Bulletin of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture* (SRCA). In the wake of the critical reflection throughout these years, Liang Sicheng’s idea of architecture for me is open-ended lore abreast of time: Being acquainted with the modern knowledge while committing to our tradition, especially when it comes to a nation state of millennia whose architecture was transforming into a new epoch. In so doing, Liang possessed advanced thinking prior to his period but never became arrogant toward his contemporaries. In observance of Liang’s 120th anniversary, through three aspects revealed in this article, I would like to pay my wholehearted tribute to his academic thoughts and scholarly contributions.

First, Liang Sicheng’s construction of the research and preservation of China’s traditional architecture. In the Introduction of his *History of Chinese Architecture*: 1. Let the nature take its course of creation—reconstruction is more prosperous than repairs, and does not require the original to survive; 2. The ethics of advocating thrift and virtue—arrogance and extravagance violate the beauty of integrity, and strange skills and ingenuity are not elegant; 3. The etiquette view that pays heed to the disposition—the spatial sequence is largely contained in the classics, and the shapes and styles are mostly seen in the poems; 4. The concept of master and apprentice passed down—the lore of craftsmanship is rarely recorded in books, and the inheritance of the skills is entirely dictated by hand-in-hand mentorship. Summarized per these four key

principles, Liang comprehensively showcased the original ideas and traditional essences of Chinese architecture characterized by the timber structure.

Liang Sicheng’s academic perspective, however, was beyond historiography while touching upon mankind’s evolution—metabolism as of natural birth and death rather than cultural consciousness of a nation state—and addressed a modern idea of preservation concerned with symbiosis of old and new. Not unlike the West, since long and throughout China’s millennia of history, it was not until the tremendous modification that a modern scheme of built heritage be formed. The precondition, to begin with, is historical and theoretical research of art and architecture. In his ‘Why is the Research of Chinese Architecture,’ therefore, Liang pointed out that a nation state could only be revived via re-studying its eternal classics in a systematic way. For example, the Song-dynasty architectural manual *Yingzao fashi* as well as a book on Qing dynasty construction methods *Qingshi yingzao zeli*, for the first time in history, revealed how ancient Chinese civilisation, based on moral and aesthetic approach, archived spatial magnificence through building system and craftsmanship. To be noted, Liang redeemed his commitment to deciphering the ‘Bible book’ at the expense of life-long endeavors.

Incorporating with Liu Dunzhen and working together with SRCA colleagues, Liang Sicheng commenced a large scale of field investigation for those significant relics and heritage ranging from Western and Eastern Han to the Wei, Tsin, Southern and Northern Dynasties; from Sui and Tang to Song, Liao, Jin and Yuan Dynasties. When it came to the unprecedented scholarly success resulted from scientific surveys and accurate records, not only did the important contribution of Zhu Qiqian and his SRCA be indebted to Liang and his team, but the previous

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horizons of European and Japanese work on Oriental art and architecture were completely broadened.

These achievements provided subjects of study with reasonable necessities to be preserved. Although Liang Sicheng would despair of securing those heritage and relics from demolition in the past a hundred years on the mainland, on the one hand, it, after all, was he—along with his groundbreaking notions of ‘Consciousness of Protection’ and ‘Repair the Old as the Old’—who had significantly contributed to the preservation movements since the mid-20th century on the other. According to today’s UNESCO World Heritage list, China tops the rest of the globe and for this, with certain, we shall attribute the hard-won credit to Liang, who was not merely the vanguard of architectural discipline and education, but also the founder of research and protection of Chinese architecture and built heritage.

Second, rethinking the way in which China moved forward to modern architecture from traditional ones. Liang Sicheng, in his ‘Why is the Research of Chinese Architecture,’ deemed that Western modern architecture, rather than in a vacuum, did possess its own cultural and artistic origins. Under the spell of enlightening modernity and so-called *Zeitgeist* inspired by Romantic classicism, as a matter of fact, the modern transformation of Western traditional architecture would never take place until accessing capacities stemmed from architectural industry and machine aesthetics, Gothic vernacular of Craftsmanship in the Arts and Crafts Movement, as well as Naturalism of Art Nouveau.

Seen in this light, could Chinese architecture’s to-be-modern transformation go beyond the domestic realities? From today’s point of view, China’s architectural modernity can hardly be processed in its motherland at the expense of Chinoiserie and, as a result, demonstrated leapfrog evolution among the intellectual progressiveness in line with classics, neo-classics, modernism, and so forth. Upon which, Liang Sicheng had succeeded in reaching the height atop his time in terms of value perception and working methodology.

Besides, in his ‘Why is the Research of Chinese Architecture,’ one would clearly behold Liang’s understanding—in the Republican twilight notwithstanding—of how Western modern architecture, towards stripped-down abstraction, was logically constructed along with function, structure, and material. Chinese architecture, likewise, should have regarded Antique Style or ‘Palace Style’ as ones of, but not limited to, many alternatives with cultural identity. To be specific, that was the reason why Liang proposed refining ‘Chinese-ness’ and ‘Grammar’ and creating ‘New Chinese Architecture and City Design.’ Many years later, he condensed related discourses just as three words: New and

Chinese (Liang 1959). To conclude, the main idea why the research of Chinese architecture was, albeit unconsciously, to enhance architects’ creativity by means of imbuing traditional knowledge and interest.

Nowadays, it has been still a problematic issue regarding how to cope with modernity and its relationship with tradition, universality, and localisation. Yet there, at very least, is a point of view to be relatively crystal: The formal aesthetics of a building that deserves timelessness should never be repeated through rigid imitation; conversely, it is supposed to redeem re-creation on the Chinese soil; namely, a transformative creation honed in one’s motherland. That is, a ‘New and Chinese’ product, so to speak, at which Liang Sicheng wholeheartedly aimed for Chinese architecture’s progressiveness into the future. China’s remarkable architects of the 1980s, individually and collectively, inherited and developed Liang’s Darwin approach to architecture, by which they also represent creative motives and innovative spirit abreast of the modern turn of vernacular wisdom.

Third, critical thinking and reflective speculation for caution and authenticity in academia. In the Republican China and after 1949, Liang Sicheng aligned his scholarly trajectory with the expression of each period’s background and logic. Whatever long-lasting shortcomings of Chinese architecture weighing heavily with foreign ‘Western and traditional’ variables, or self-critical interrogation in regard to historiography and methodology, both, while triggering (in)direct conversation and liaison with the rest of the world, unpacked the literati charm of traditional Chinese people with lofty ideals and the subjective consciousness of modern intellectuals. To name a few, say, in the Introduction of his mimeograph copy *History of Chinese architecture*, Liang questioned the heroic periodisation of architecture either on a dynastic basis or technological determinism. Not merely did the political turbulence at that time fuel such reflection upon methodology, but also Liang manifested historical writing beyond operationalism, not unlike Manfredo Tafuri and those progressive historians who toppled down Bourgeois aesthetics in the 1950s and 60s, drawing upon his own critical awareness of scholarship per se and formal knowledge.

And not least, to borrow British scholar-architect Alan Colquhoun’s concluding words of his 1983 seminal article—Three Kinds of Historicism—as ending this piece: ‘History provides both the ideas that are in need of criticism and the material out of which this criticism is forged. An architecture that is constantly aware of its own history, but constantly critical of the seductions of history, is what we should aim for today.’

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