

The Languages of China

Architecture, Canon and Institution in Contemporary Practice

LUCIO BARBERA¹

Beijing as a Contemporary Architectural School

At first glance, the architecture of the Chinese city over the last twenty years appears summary and awkwardly emphatic, a mirror of all the commonplaces of contemporaneity, as compliant as that of yesterday, from the Maoist period, and often heavily academic. Yet, as one gradually deepens one's understanding of today's Chinese cities and of the university as a place for the education of architects – still holding a position of considerable importance even in relation to professional practice – it becomes increasingly clear that an exceptional school of architecture is actively at work in Beijing. It embodies a cultivated and conscious way of considering the city, territory, landscape, society, the relationships among them and their relationship with history: a contemporary tradition rooted in the history of the country's modernisation, founded by an extraordinary master, Liang Sicheng, and revitalised by significant heirs who, although not always closely aligned in professional and academic debate, are nonetheless deeply embedded in the historical reality unfolding before our eyes.²

Liang Sicheng himself was a predestined son. His father, Liang Qi Chao, occupies a central place in the history of modern China: a revolutionary, intellectual and exile, a “child prodigy” among the group of late-nineteenth-century reformers who attempted a great reform of the Empire through a synthesis of Western science and Chinese culture. Through both inheritance and education, Liang Sicheng was superbly prepared for the role that destiny assigned to him: leader of the first generation of Chinese scholars of architecture. Wilma Fairbank described him as “a bridge between the West and China”.

We see him in a photograph from the early 1930s: extremely slender, dressed in Western clothes, his straight hair perfectly parted, thin specta-

1. Lucio Barbera, Professore Ordinario in Composizione Architettonica e Urbana, Sapienza Università di Roma (lucio.barbera@uniroma1.it).

2. BARBERA 2006.

cles, composed posture – the bearing of someone fully aware of his status and his mission. Passionate about drawing and music, he studied Western sciences, English, and both Chinese and Western humanities at Tsinghua University in Beijing. In 1924 he went to Philadelphia, where he attended the Department of Architecture; in 1926 his father sent him from China an ancient book destined to change the course of his life: the *Yingzao Fashi*, an architectural manual compiled in 1103 during the Song dynasty. This text provided the key to a scientific study of Chinese historical architecture, which had never before been investigated using modern methods and had until then relied solely on artisanal transmission.

His life and studies unfolded during the most dramatic period of modern Chinese history: the Japanese invasion, the Second World War, and the civil war. Together with his wife, Lin Huiyin, a poet and refined intellectual, he travelled across China from north to south and from east to west, systematically surveying and documenting ancient architecture, drawing it with a precise and sensitive hand, analysing it and reconstructing what he himself would define as the grammar of Chinese architecture.

From Craft to Knowledge: The Grammar of Chinese Architecture

In constant flight before advancing armies, like a refugee, he miraculously managed to save drawings, photographs and ancient books, while pursuing the idea of an architectural modernity profoundly rooted in historical knowledge of his own culture. In 1946 he entrusted the very young Wu Liangyong – then only twenty-four years old – with the founding of the Department of Architecture at Tsinghua University. Wu, who would later become an eminent figure, represents the most direct continuation of that school.

Born in 1922, Wu Liangyong is today the living memory of the Beijing School. Yet this is not an inert memory: he designed, wrote and conducted research, bringing together all scales of architecture within a unified line of thought, from construction detail to urban form, from typological research to landscape design. In his watercolours and coloured ink drawings – at once profoundly modern and deeply Chinese – he continues to interpret the vast breath of his country's landscape.

China, like every empire, has been represented and defined throughout history above all by its language: a complex cultural and political canon,

constantly refined in order to reduce to unity the many Chinas and the many non-Chinas present within a space as vast as a continent and open to incursions by external cultures. The Middle Kingdom has experienced different dynasties and ethnic groups, fragmentation and recomposition, invasions and resistance. Yet, through all this, Chinese culture has survived as a unitary language of ever-increasing complexity.

Seen from the outside, it appears that it is not so much the peoples of China as its culture – its languages more than its spoken tongues, its architecture more than its architects – that constitute the true subject of history. Ideographic writing is the clearest symbol of this condition: a complex system capable of transmitting tens of thousands of ideas without phonetic mediation, legible across different dialects and languages.

The official spoken language, modern Mandarin, employs extremely ancient signs. It is thanks to this writing system that imperial edicts, poems, novels and administrative texts could be understood across regions separated by vast linguistic distances. China's political unity was, first and foremost, a unity of language.

China, with its unitary imperial canon – rigid yet extraordinarily inclusive – has, over time, assimilated all the cultures that approached it, transforming even the most aggressive influences into integrated elements. Like an organism capable of metabolising every novelty, Chinese culture has produced many different Chinas, all traceable back to a single ordering principle.

Read together, the four projects presented in this issue suggest a specific interpretation of contemporary institutional architecture in China. Rather than pursuing formal autonomy or symbolic rupture, they operate as mediating structures, designed to protect, organise and transmit cultural content across different temporal scales.

In this sense, architecture is not conceived as an expressive language, but as a regulated practice grounded in continuity, repetition and controlled variation. Whether addressing archaeological heritage, sacred landscapes, scientific knowledge or architectural education, each project functions as an infrastructural device that enables access without exhaustion, visibility without exposure, and use without loss of meaning.

This approach resonates with a longer historical trajectory in which cultural production in China has been structured through shared codes and canonical systems, privileging stability over originality and coher-

ence over individual expression. Far from implying a return to tradition, the projects demonstrate how contemporary architecture can engage critically with institutional frameworks, transforming constraints into operative principles.

Ultimately, the four cases illustrate an architectural position in which design acts as a form of cultural stewardship: not by representing history or knowledge, but by constructing the conditions for their continued existence and transmission.

Translation, Mediation and the Western Canon

This conception of architecture as a regulated cultural language finds a revealing parallel in the way Western artistic and architectural canons were received, translated and reinterpreted in twentieth-century China. As recent scholarship³ has shown, the encounter with the Italian Renaissance did not take the form of passive imitation or stylistic adoption, but rather unfolded as a complex process of linguistic and conceptual mediation. In the writings of figures such as Fu Lei and Liang Sicheng,⁴ Renaissance art and architecture were not approached as closed historical models, but as reservoirs of principles capable of being reactivated within a different cultural horizon.

Fu Lei's lectures on European art, and in particular on Leonardo da Vinci, exemplify an interpretative strategy grounded in translation rather than formal analysis. By mobilising categories drawn from Chinese literary criticism and aesthetics, Fu sought to render the emotional and spiritual qualities of Renaissance painting intelligible to a Chinese audience, privileging resonance over accuracy and affinity over genealogy. Leonardo's work was thus not presented as a foreign artefact, but as a living language whose meaning could be accessed through analogy, musicality and poetic evocation.

Liang Sicheng's engagement with Leonardo followed a different yet equally mediating path. Writing as an architect and historian in the early years of the People's Republic, Liang reframed Leonardo primarily as an engineer and planner, emphasising his empirical methods, technical imagination and infrastructural ambitions. In doing so, he aligned the Renais-

3. CHEN 2017, pp. 355-366.

4. LIANG 2013 (1952), pp. 131-134.

sance polymath with a vision of modernity compatible with planned development and institutional rationality. Leonardo became, in this reading, less a symbol of artistic genius than a figure through whom architecture, science and social organisation could be thought together.

A similar logic can be observed in the Chinese reception of Renaissance architectural theory, including the figure of Andrea Palladio. Palladio's work – introduced to China especially through the examples of Paul Cret, one of Liang Sicheng's teachers – was not assimilated as a repertory of forms, but as a system of rules, proportions and relationships capable of structuring space beyond stylistic contingencies. What was transmitted was not the image of the villa or the temple front, but the idea of architecture as an ordered practice grounded in measure, repetition and normative clarity. In this sense, Palladio functioned less as a historical reference than as a conceptual mediator, reinforcing an understanding of architecture as a discipline founded on shared principles rather than individual expression.

These episodes of cultural translation illuminate a deeper continuity between historical discourse and contemporary practice. They demonstrate how architectural meaning in China has long been constructed through processes of interpretation, adaptation and institutional framing, rather than through direct lineage or formal continuity. Read against this background, the four projects presented in this issue appear not as isolated responses to specific programs, but as part of a broader tradition in which architecture operates as a language of mediation – capable of absorbing external references, regulating internal transformations and sustaining cultural coherence across time.

References

BARBERA 2006

Lucio Barbera, *I linguaggi della Cina*, "L'industria delle Costruzioni", n. 389, pp. 4-11.

CHEN 2017

Chen Liu, *Leonardo Unveiled by Chinese Writers: The Reception of Renaissance Art in Twentieth-Century China*, "Journal of Art Historiography", no. 17, 2017, pp. 355–366.

LIANG 2013 (1952)

Liang Sicheng, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Visionary Architectural Engineer* (1952), in Id., *Complete Works of Liang Sicheng*, China Architecture & Building Press, 2013, vol. 5, pp. 131–134.