

# Chinese Architecture as Mediation between Modernities

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**Abstract:** This reflection approaches contemporary Chinese architecture in terms of mediation, understood not as a secondary or conciliatory gesture, but as a core operative condition of architectural practice. Mediation here refers to architecture's capacity to organise relations between heterogeneous temporalities, forms of knowledge and regimes of authority, translating historical structures into spatial systems capable of functioning within present-day institutional frameworks. Rather than focusing on stylistic categories or formal genealogies, the analysis privileges architecture's role as a structuring apparatus, operating through regulation, continuity and controlled transformation.

**Keywords:** *Architecture as mediation, Heritage and Memory, Institutional continuity.*

## *Architecture as Mediation: Scope and Method*

Architecture in contemporary China is increasingly confronted with conditions that exceed the traditional boundaries of design as formal invention. Rapid institutional transformation, large-scale heritage management, and the coexistence of long historical continuities with accelerated modernisation have foregrounded architecture's role as a mediating practice, rather than as an expressive or representational discipline. In this context, architectural projects are often required to negotiate between preservation and transformation, global technical standards and local spatial conventions, long-term cultural legitimacy and immediate institutional demands.

Unlike the Western modern project, often grounded in rupture, autonomy and expressive individuation, the Chinese condition examined here operates through institutional continuity and regulated transformation.

The four projects of institutional architecture discussed here may be read as contemporary episodes within a long historical trajectory in which architecture in China is not primarily conceived as an expressive language, but as a regulative form, capable of mediating between cultural continuity, historical transformation and institutional responsibility. Rather than proposing a stylistic position or a recognisable formal repertoire, these projects articulate an architectural attitude grounded in mediation: be-

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tween past and present, protection and use, permanence and change. This perspective resonates with the interpretation advanced by Peter Rowe and Seng Kuan, for whom modern Chinese architecture cannot be understood through a simple opposition between tradition and modernity, but rather through a continuous process of negotiation between *essence* and *form*. In this sense, the contemporary project does not operate by reproducing inherited forms, nor by rejecting them outright, but by translating deep-seated cultural structures into operative spatial systems capable of responding to new institutional, technological and social conditions. This position challenges dominant narratives of architectural modernity that equate innovation with rupture and authorship with autonomy.

Lucio Barbera's reflections on *The Languages of China*<sup>2</sup> provide a crucial theoretical framework for understanding this process. By conceiving culture as a system of languages – where writing, architecture, spatial order and political authority are inseparable – Barbera shifts attention away from architecture as object and towards architecture as structuring practice. Within this framework, continuity is not ensured by the persistence of forms, but by the transmissibility of rules, codes and procedures. Architecture thus participates in a broader cultural economy in which stability is achieved not through immobility, but through regulated transformation.

The four projects make this condition tangible in different yet convergent ways. In the protective shelters for the archaeological sites of Zhoukoudian and Guangyuan, architecture deliberately renounces any claim to autonomy or formal protagonism. Instead, it assumes the role of *protective and environmental infrastructure*, designed to stabilise fragile contexts while minimising physical and symbolic interference. Here, the architectural project is defined less by its visible form than by its capacity to regulate climate, movement, perception and access over time.

In these contexts, modernity manifests itself not as a gesture of rupture, but as the ability to render conservation operative. The architectural intervention becomes a technical and cultural device that allows the site to endure, transforming protection into an active design principle. Reversibility, minimal impact and environmental mediation are not constraints imposed from outside, but integral components of the architectural concept itself. A parallel yet distinct logic operates in the Rizhao Science and Technology Museum and in the School of Urban Design at Wuhan University. In these cases, the focus shifts from the protection of material

2. BARBERA 2006.

heritage to *the institutional transmission of knowledge*. Yet architecture once again refrains from acting as a representational container. Instead, it constructs spatial frameworks within which scientific understanding and architectural education can be practiced, experienced and renewed.

At Rizhao, scientific knowledge is not monumentalised but spatialised through sequences of movement, controlled light and sectional continuity. The building operates as a cognitive device, where circulation, structure and perception are inseparable. At Wuhan, architectural education is embedded within an environment that actively shapes modes of interaction, collaboration and learning. Here, space itself becomes pedagogical, operating through use rather than through symbolic statement.

This understanding of architecture as an open, time-based process finds a clear echo in Vieri Quilici's reflections on the *life of works*. Architecture is not conceived as a closed artefact, complete at the moment of construction, but as a structure destined to be transformed by use, interpretation and institutional practices. The four projects do not seek to fix meaning; rather, they establish *conditions of possibility* within which meaning can continue to evolve. Within this framework, the relationship with history is neither linear nor reconciliatory. The tension between continuity and transformation recalls the image of the *angel of history* evoked by Walter Benjamin and later elaborated by Hannah Arendt<sup>3</sup>: an awareness of accumulated layers of the past, confronted with the irreversible movement of time. The architectural projects examined here appear to accept this condition, positioning themselves not as instruments of symbolic redemption, but as practices of responsibility operating between memory and necessity.

This dynamic may be further clarified through Enzo Melandri<sup>4</sup>'s conceptual figure of *the line and the circle*. The line of progress – technological innovation, institutional reform, modernisation – runs inevitably through contemporary Chinese architecture. Yet this linear movement is continuously folded back into a circular system of norms, codes and legitimising structures. Architecture operates precisely within this tension, not by resolving it, but by holding it in a productive state of equilibrium.

In conclusion, the four projects do not propose an exportable model nor a unified architectural language. Instead, they delineate a cultural position in which architecture renounces exception in order to assume responsibility for duration, replaces expression with mediation, and recognises de-

3. ARENDT, BENJAMIN 2017 (2006).

4. MELANDRI 2004.

sign not as the site of individual authorship, but as a practice embedded within institutional and historical frameworks. It is within this calibrated, non-heroic position that a specific and meaningful form of contemporary architectural practice in China may be identified today.

This approach to heritage and preservation may be further clarified through the perspective articulated by *The Past Is a Foreign Country*.<sup>5</sup> Lowenthal's argument – that the past is irreducibly distant and cannot be recovered without transformation – offers a critical lens through which the architectural strategies adopted at Zhoukoudian and Guangyuan can be more precisely understood. Preservation, in this view, is not an act of restoration aimed at recovering an original state, but a form of mediation that inevitably reshapes the past in order to render it intelligible and inhabitable in the present. Rather than denying this distance, the architectural interventions examined here explicitly acknowledge it. By avoiding reconstruction, scenographic completion or symbolic immersion, the projects refuse the illusion of proximity to the past. Instead, they construct controlled environments that stabilise fragile sites while maintaining their temporal otherness. The archaeological cave and the sacred cliff are neither frozen nor re-enacted; they are framed, protected and made accessible through architectural systems that regulate climate, movement and perception without collapsing historical distance. In this sense, preservation becomes an active cultural practice rather than a conservative one. Architecture does not claim to restore the past, but to *host it*, accepting its foreignness and organising the conditions under which it can be encountered without being consumed. This position aligns preservation with responsibility rather than nostalgia, and situates architectural design as a critical intermediary between irreversible loss and contemporary use.

### *Two Configurations of Modernity*

Whereas the Western tradition, as reconstructed by Frances Yates<sup>6</sup>, conceived memory as a spatial theatre of images, the Chinese tradition embedded memory within institutional continuity and ritual order. Contemporary Chinese architecture does not build theatres of recollection; it constructs conditions of regulated duration.

Within international debates on modern Chinese architecture, attempts to define a coherent theoretical framework have often oscillated between

5. LOWENTHAL 1999.

6. YATES 1966.

narratives of rupture and accounts of stylistic adaptation. Yet a number of scholars have argued that the specificity of Chinese modernity lies less in formal innovation than in the capacity of architecture to operate as a mediating apparatus between historical continuity and institutional transformation. In this perspective, modern architecture in China does not emerge as a negation of inherited spatial orders, but as their reconfiguration within new political, technical and administrative regimes. Early twentieth-century figures working in China already framed architectural practice as a form of cultural mediation rather than a simple transfer of Western models, acknowledging the necessity of negotiating between imported systems of knowledge and deeply rooted spatial conventions. While such positions remain historically situated and often marked by asymmetrical power relations, they nonetheless anticipate a recurring condition in which architecture functions as an intermediary between global modernity and local legitimacy.<sup>7</sup>

More recent scholarship has further articulated this condition by shifting attention from architecture as a formal language to architecture as an institutional and infrastructural practice. In particular, writings by architects and historians working across Chinese and international contexts have emphasised how contemporary projects are embedded within long-standing systems of governance, territorial organisation and cultural administration. From this standpoint, architecture operates not primarily through symbolic expression, but through its capacity to stabilise, coordinate and render legible complex social and spatial processes. The projects discussed here align closely with this interpretation: whether addressing heritage preservation, scientific dissemination or architectural education, they foreground architecture's role as a structuring framework rather than as an autonomous object. Mediation, in this sense, becomes not a secondary attribute but a defining condition of practice, positioning contemporary Chinese architecture within a broader discourse on institutional continuity and infrastructural logic.

The notion of architecture as mediation acquires further depth when examined through both early and contemporary international interpretations of Chinese architectural modernity. In the early twentieth century, Henry Killam Murphy explicitly framed architectural practice in China as a cultural and institutional negotiation rather than a stylistic import. Writing from within the context of missionary and educational commis-

7. MURPHY 1930.

sions, Murphy argued for a modern architecture capable of incorporating Chinese spatial principles, constructional logic and symbolic order without resorting to historical imitation. Although embedded in asymmetrical cultural and political conditions, his position is significant in that it recognised mediation – rather than formal translation – as the core task of architectural practice in China.<sup>8</sup>

From a contemporary perspective, Xing Ruan has developed a more structurally grounded interpretation of this condition. Ruan situates modern and contemporary Chinese architecture within a long continuum of state formation, infrastructural development and institutional continuity, emphasising how architecture operates as a stabilising apparatus rather than an expressive medium. In his account, architectural meaning is produced less through formal innovation than through the capacity to organise territory, regulate collective life and sustain cultural legitimacy over time. Read together, Murphy's early intuition and Ruan's critical framework delineate a field in which mediation is not an episodic strategy but a persistent structural condition – one that resonates directly with the four projects examined here, and with their refusal of both stylistic rupture and nostalgic reconstruction.

If Ruan's interpretation has shown how Chinese modernity was shaped through unexpected methodological affinities between the Beaux-Arts tradition and Chinese artisanal culture, the projects discussed here suggest a further displacement. What emerges is not primarily the continuity of a formal syntax, but the gradual transformation of architecture into an institutional device capable of regulating time, use and memory.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, mediation does not operate at the level of stylistic adaptation, but at the level of structural responsibility, where architecture assumes the task of organising historical continuity within changing administrative and social frameworks.

### *Courtyard, Knowledge and the Question of Modernity*

Rather than framing contemporary Chinese architecture as a confrontation between tradition and global modernity, it is more productive to approach it as an epistemological negotiation between distinct modes of spatial knowledge. As articulated by Xing Ruan, the courtyard operates not simply as a typological residue but as a cultural and cogni-

8. XING 2021, pp. 60–90, pp. 120–145.

9. XING 2002.

tive device through which space, time and ethical equilibrium are held together. In this sense, architecture becomes a medium for structuring life rather than an autonomous object, with the void acting as an active generator of meaning, experience and relational order. This epistemic framework finds constructive continuity in the work of Wang Shu<sup>10</sup>, whose notion of sustainability departs from techno-scientific optimisation to recover architecture as a historically embedded system of climatic intelligence, material reuse and social coexistence. His emphasis on recycled materials, rammed earth and artisanal processes does not aim at symbolic regionalism, but at reactivating a long-standing architectural logic in which material, climate and human practice form an integrated whole. Sustainability, in this reading, is not a stylistic agenda but a form of inherited knowledge that precedes modern environmental discourse and challenges its universalising assumptions.

Within this continuum, Chang Yung Ho positions contemporary Chinese architecture explicitly between two modernities: an imported Western modernity grounded in object-based spatial production and linear perspective, and an indigenous modernity rooted in enclosure, introversion and the primacy of the void. Chang's work reframes this condition not as a conflict but as a productive overlap, where time is designed alongside space and architecture unfolds as a sequence of lived experiences rather than as a fixed visual composition. A comparable concern with continuity, spatial enclosure and cultural reinvention also emerges in the heritage regeneration projects of Zhang Jie<sup>11</sup> at Tsinghua University, notably in the Jingdezhen Pengjia Alley Compound, awarded the 2024 RIBA International Awards for Excellence. Situated within the historic context of courtyard-based ceramic workshops, the project exemplifies how preservation and contemporary practice can converge through the careful reactivation of spatial frameworks rather than through formal imitation. Taken together, the positions of Ruan, Wang Shu, Chang Yung Ho and Zhang Jie delineate a shared epistemological ground in which the relevance of the courtyard in contemporary Chinese architecture lies less in its formal persistence than in its capacity to operate as a resilient spatial framework.

In conclusion, the four projects do not propose an exportable model nor a unified architectural language. Instead, they delineate a cultural

10. CHEN 2024.

11. LI 2025.

position in which architecture renounces exception in order to assume responsibility for duration, replaces expression with mediation, and recognises design not as the site of individual authorship, but as a practice embedded within institutional and historical frameworks. Unlike dominant narratives of architectural modernity that equate innovation with rupture and autonomy with expressive individuation, the condition examined here suggests a different paradigm: one in which transformation is achieved through regulated continuity rather than disruption. It is within this calibrated, non-heroic position that a specific and meaningful form of contemporary architectural practice in China may be identified today.

### *Two Modernities*

“If the modern is that which sets history in motion,” as Lucio Barbera has argued, then modernity cannot be reduced to a chronological period or a stylistic rupture, but must be understood as a dynamic principle that reactivates the temporal structure of history itself.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the question is not whether contemporary Chinese architecture is modern, but how it mobilises history. Reinhart Koselleck has shown that modernity emerges when the tension between the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” becomes structurally unstable, producing acceleration and the projection of radically new futures.<sup>13</sup> Western modernity has frequently unfolded within this widening gap, privileging anticipation, rupture and the forward thrust of historical time. At the same time, as Jürgen Habermas has maintained, modernity also presents itself as an “unfinished project,” grounded in critique and in the continuous redefinition of normative frameworks.<sup>14</sup> Yet Walter Benjamin reminds us that this movement is inseparable from shock, fragmentation and the interruption of historical continuity.<sup>15</sup>

Against this background, the projects examined here suggest a different configuration of the modern. History is indeed set in motion, but not primarily through negation or acceleration. Instead, transformation operates through recalibration, through the regulated reorganisation of institutional and spatial continuities. If one modernity intensifies the distance between past and future, the other works within that distance,

12. BARBERA 2019.

13. KOSELLECK 1985.

14. HABERMAS 1983.

15. BENJAMIN 1940.

structuring it. Mediation thus becomes the operative space in which distinct temporal logics are held in tension, and modernity appears not as rupture, but as the sustained responsibility for duration.

Recent scholarship on China has increasingly framed modernity not as the delayed reception of a Western programme, but as a plural and internally differentiated field shaped by ideology, institutional reform and competing temporal regimes. Jiawen Han, for instance, explicitly adopts the framework of “multiple modernities” to read contemporary Chinese architectural culture between state agendas and professional positioning.<sup>16</sup> In a different register, Edward Denison has reconstructed Chinese architectural modernity as a heterogeneous formation, mediated by multiple sources and not reducible to a single modernist genealogy.<sup>17</sup> Complementary perspectives emerge from studies that link modernity to the production of urban form and governance structures—where the built environment becomes an instrument through which society and institutions are remade over time.<sup>18</sup> Read against this backdrop, the four projects discussed here can be understood as contemporary instances of a specifically institutional modernity: one that sets history in motion not by rupture alone, but by reorganising the conditions of duration, legitimacy and use within evolving administrative frameworks.

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16. HAN 2017

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