

## **American and European Architects in China:**

### **Global Practice in Historical Context**

Jhennifer A. Amundson, Ph.D.

Global Practices: Architecture & Urbanism in China, 09 September 2011

Judson University

Although the recent extraordinary surge of development in China has opened opportunities that are unprecedented in their scale and number, professional predecessors to today's American and European architects have been building in, and drawing influence from, China, for over four centuries. China has long allowed certain perforations along its physical and ideological borders, through which it has exchanged religious ideals, aesthetic motifs and other cultural effects. The historical exchange of architectural ideas between East and West contextualizes the recent vogue in China to hire architects from abroad, and the resultant rush by American and European architects to secure work in China. Viewing historical reflections is more comfortable than staring starkly into a mirror to consider the promise and limitations of these global relationships.

One of those limitations is language, and I mean here the use of terms that are generally understood, yet plagued with inaccuracies and assumptions. The division of the globe along the equator into the northern and southern hemispheres is geometrically clean, but divides whole continents, and thus cultural landscapes. While the earth's axis designates the ultimate points to the north and south, there are no "most eastern" or "farthest west" points on the globe when we consider the other pair of hemispheres. The Psalmist (103) exploits this fact by expressing extreme distance to be "as far as the east is from the west." Yet these conventions have a comfortable familiarity, and have some usefulness in distinguishing cultural patterns that ignore the Prime Meridian: the "West" is us, here in the United States, who have derived our prevalent cultural heritage from Europe; the "East" is far away, both geographically and culturally, as we are taught about the spherical globe as it is portrayed in flat maps. Shifting the Pacific Ocean to the center gives us an alternate view, and we see China as a neighbor, admittedly one on the other side of a very, very big ocean, but perhaps not quite as far away as we thought.

The cultural and geographic East and West have been connected through the exchange of goods and ideas through the two primary motivations for communication: trade and religion. Architecture, as a responsive discipline, has followed the merchants and the evangelists. The oldest architectural testaments to this relationship were built by Christians in China as early as the sixteenth century. In addition to affecting the way that groups of Chinese thought about their spirituality, missionaries helped to shape the way people in Europe thought about China. Jesuits spread the idea that the Chinese were among the lost nations and in

need of deliverance from the curse of Noah. Umberto Eco has written that such ideas turned the European mind to considering China as a “prodigal son who should return to the home of the common father.”<sup>1</sup> The Jesuits acclimated to Chinese culture and language so that they could effectively communicate in the foreign land, but they saw no need to be shaped by that culture, or to bring any of its influence back to Europe except as a subject of scholarly inquiry and popular edification.

When circumstances allowed them to build, the Jesuits constructed churches as close to European models as possible. One early example of such a building that still stands, more or less, is the Cathedral of St. Paul in Macau, exemplary in its method of conception and articulation: an Italian Jesuit missionary directed the construction, perhaps with plans and a supervisor brought from Italy. The team of laborers, which comprised Chinese believers and Japanese Christians in exile, was lead by Italians, who did not avail themselves, or their architecture, to be modified by local custom. With the missionaries, architectural exchange is a one-way street; there actually is no “exchange.”

Instead, it was merchants who provided the impetus to deliver the aesthetic of China back to the West. Trading companies were established to connect China with such western ports as London, Amsterdam, Lisbon, and later New York, and Stockholm. From the latter, in the 1740s, William Chambers sailed with the Swedish East India Company to Canton. In the midst of his dealings for spices, porcelain and tea, Chambers found his curiosity peaked by his surroundings, and he began to collect images of temples and pagodas in sketchbooks. Chambers was so affected by the environment, as his biographer writes, in China he decided to “follow the bent of his genius.” In other words, he rejected all but certain wealth and comfort as a successful trader to take up architecture.

However inspiring were Chambers’ uncommon travels in China, he followed a more conventional path to acquire his training. Born in Stockholm to wealthy Scottish parents, he aspired to develop the skills that would serve the interests of his social peers. By 1750 he had quit the merchant trade and pursued his profession with Europeans, traveling first to France to study with pioneering archaeologist and architect Charles-Louis Clérisseau and later to Italy to study its antiquities. Chambers’ experience reflected the eighteenth-century European value for exemplary Classical monuments that punctuated the itinerary for gentlemen on the Grand Tour through England, France and Italy—sites that remain popular with architecture programs today. Like Inigo Jones and Christopher Wren before him, he visited the acknowledged capitals of governance and taste, seeking out historic architecture as well as new, modern buildings.

---

<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco, *Serendipities: Language and Lunacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 68.

Thousands of miles from the pagodas and temples that first inspired his desire to become an architect, Chambers launched his career in London, quickly rising to the top of his field, building a reputation that rests, to a great extent, on Neo-Classical monuments. But Chambers never gave up on the object of his first affections, and helped to spread the appreciation of Chinese design in the English-speaking world and beyond, through published and built works. One of these latter came from a commission for a series of small decorative pavilions to ornament the royal gardens at Kew. The gardens were conceived in the eighteenth-century *Picturesque* tradition, which bears aesthetic similarities with the ancient Chinese *poetic garden*. Chambers strove to make Kew one of the most picturesque gardens in all of Europe, serving up a banquet of architecture, including Roman temples, an “Arabian” kiosk, and a slender Chinese lookout tower which still stands. Called the Pagoda, this 163-foot tall structure, whose floors diminish as the building rises, bears striking resemblance to the tapering pagodas he had seen in China, as compared here. Its original bright color scheme and a swarm of eighty gilded dragons, are sadly lost. Chambers’ pagoda is famous, but not unique, for its time: the popularity of the taste called *Chinoiserie*, which favored asymmetries and fanciful imagery of China, oftentimes blended with other traditions, is seen in villa and garden structures from courts as diverse as those in Belgium, Italy and Germany.

Chambers popularized Chinese designs in a published portfolio of the Kew buildings in 1763, and an earlier encyclopedic work on the subject. Some contemporary critics derided the books as “rather absurd Dissertation[s]” and the motifs themselves as irrelevant, “unmeaning” “frills.”<sup>2</sup> Such criticism reflected the taste that has dominated western aesthetic values: a preference for Greco-Roman Classicism, which was the gold standard for taste and education—as Chambers’ own educational travels show. In its continuance of a great Western tradition, Classicism carried the authority and gravitas appropriate for settings of serious, weighty character, while exotic aesthetic systems were acceptable only in environments of amusement and relaxation, if not outright hedonism and frivolity. From one western court to another, the male voice of authority sounded through arcaded Halls of Justice replete with the Classical Orders and gilded thrones; but the laughter of sweethearts and demure feminine conversation resonated in parlors awash in Chinese textiles and lacquer dressing tables.

Extravagant courts and fashionable homeowners, even one architect of an American university with broad historic architectural aspirations, were more than happy to revel in this indulgence. Their material culture, celebrations of a place to which it was unlikely they would or could ever travel, reveals the vogue for this fashion through wooden fretwork embellishments in architecture and furniture, fabrics festooned with

---

<sup>2</sup> Edwin Beresford Chancellor, *The Lives of the British Architects* (London: Duckworth, 1909): 316.

dragons and phoenixes, wallpapers bearing fantastical mountain landscapes. Imported porcelain decorated with scenes populated by mandarins provided the European's breakfast table appropriately exotic vessels to serve drinking chocolate, a new luxury from another part of the world. The stern façade of this British manse screens a most elaborate frosting of carved work from prying eyes. Perhaps the apotheosis of Chinoiserie was achieved at the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, where architect John Nash revealed that if inspiration from one exotic culture is good, inspiration from a half-dozen is better, and freely adopted Indian, Arab, medieval and Chinese and other traditions in the conception of a particularly exuberant style that dazzled critics alternately called Neo-Mughal, Indo-Saracenic and Hindu-Gothic.

The Royal Pavilion represents the last gasp of eighteenth-century fervor for exoticism that encompassed and fueled the West's interest in Chinese design. Such stratospheric flights of fancy were brought down to earth by the weighty demands of aesthetic theory for shrewdly-judged precedents that could contribute to cultural morality. A. W. N. Pugin gave clearest voice to this directive in a publication of 1843, in which he blamed architecture's "Bable of confusion," on private judgment that was, at least in part, inspired by the dangerous vogue for travel among architects. Depending on their itinerary, they returned to their homelands thusly: "One breathes nothing but the Alhambra, another the Parthenon, a third is full of lotus cups and pyramids from the banks of the Nile, a fourth, from Rome, is all dome and basilica."<sup>3</sup> Pugin advocated an architecture that derived its style and meaning from local customs. As Pugin's ideals spread, no self-respecting architect could possibly parlay an upward-turned roof or dragon ornament into anything suitable to modern European or American culture, for the nineteenth-century's understanding of China at the time portrayed the country as possessing none of the virtues valued by modern western society.

This dismissal of Chinese culture was exacerbated by the rise of missionary activity in China, which underscored the notion that the Chinese were in need of moral rescue by westerners. Churches rose along the coast, built designs that followed architectural developments in the West. The Jesuits constructed the baroque St. Xavier; Anglicans raised Trinity Church, modeled on English Gothic lines. Such chapels, built in the prevailing style of the parishioners' homelands, were typically built by foreign architects for congregations that blended converts and expatriates.

A church built by Baptist missionaries in Shanghai reveals specific attitudes about building in China. In the late 1840s missionaries Jehu and Henrietta Shuck espoused their desire for a new worship building, a

---

<sup>3</sup> Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, *An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England* (1843), (Oxford: St. Barnabas, 1969).

“large and respectable foreign-built chapel.”<sup>4</sup> The Shucks returned to their native Virginia to raise money and find their architect. Like so many Baptists, they asked advice of friends in their home church to recommend some mission-friendly architect who would be cheap, if not free. Their pastor did know an architect, and a Baptist one at that, who happened to be the most famous architect in the country, Thomas U. Walter. Walter had completed over two hundred designs in his career to date, and also penned a work of theory that explains the cultural valuation that he, and virtually all other contemporary American and European architects, practiced at the time.

Walter’s nineteenth-century opinions about historic civilizations and cultural values did not reflect well on the Chinese. He believed that the Chinese had “separated” themselves from the rest of the world in their habits and architecture, in which he perceived a reflection of governance. Walter’s stylistically varied practice was in keeping with his democratic nation; the conventional Chinese system smacked of state control; its centuries-old unvaried traditions were the antithesis of modernity. European systems that revealed greater flexibility and opportunity for development, not to mention being associated with the institutions that Americans had inherited, were of greater interest to him as a designer.

For his design for this “foreign-built chapel,” Walter ignored local custom and context; he designed a building proper to its intended function: the preaching of Gospel truth would be conducted in a building that should bear witness as well. He wrote that English medieval architecture showed “natural adaptedness to edifices set apart for [Christian] worship.”<sup>5</sup> Because Walter’s church design fulfilled needs that were not conditioned by the environment, it could have been built anywhere the Gospel was to be preached, and it was. In the following year he designed this church for a Baptist congregation in Norfolk, Virginia. The differences between the churches are minor; a most prominent distinction is the languages in which the Ten Commandments are written behind their respective baptisteries. The overall architectural language is indistinguishable: it is the tongue of contemporary evangelistic Protestantism, with no need to consider regional architectural dialects.

Walter’s Shanghai church is a milestone in American practice. Already by the 1840s prominent American architects could establish international ties, and they traveled more than ever. Walter had toured European capitals, and completed foreign projects not only in China but also Venezuela, to which he traveled to oversee work there. This was not average activity for most architects, but indicates the change of the profession, and the degree to which some sought opportunities to build abroad when their home economy

---

<sup>4</sup> *The Baptist Missionary Magazine*. Pub. by Executive Committee of the American Baptist Missionary Union. Vol. XXIX (Boston: John Putnam, Printer, 1849) 185.

<sup>5</sup> Walter, Lecture V.

was flat, as America's was in the 1840s. It is also significant that while Walter longed to return to Europe, and hoped for more work from the Venezuelan government, he never once indicated a remote interest to travel to China.

In the second half of the nineteenth century in America, interest in things Chinese diminished with rising resentment for Chinese immigrants who arrived to work the railways and in the Gold Rush mines, allegedly taking jobs, low-paying as they were, from "home-born" Americans. (This was not the first, nor the last, instance of this kind of bias against new arrivals by this country of immigrants, as contemporary news reports prove.) Even so, by the early twentieth century, a new kind of consonance appears in parts of American and Chinese practice with the establishment of "Chinatown" districts in major American cities.

San Francisco's is the oldest, and today the largest. The Chinese who moved there first practiced a synthetic architecture: adopting local traditions, materials, and labor, with the addition of distinctly Chinese signage and ornament. Old St. Mary's was built in 1853 by the first generation of Chinese immigrants to America, in part with stone quarried in China and carried across the ocean. Its accomplished Gothic style is a more formal version of the chapel built by Jehu Shuck, who moved to Sacramento to serve Chinese immigrants in 1854, bringing his Baptist Gothic idiom with him.

What is more telling than the buildings themselves, are articles written in popular and professional journals about the rebuilding of San Francisco following the earthquake of 1906, which reveal attitudes about the Chinese and their buildings. In early 1907 the professional journal *Architecture* summarized the difference by distinguishing between "Western utilitarianism" and "Oriental art." The superior aspects of this building, were the allegedly "American" parts of the design: anything that could be described as practical, utilitarian, business-minded and modernized. These blended with "Oriental" exterior elements: the realm of the decorative, ornamental and artful. The very development of Chinese culture was seen to be manifest in these buildings. In 1913 a local magazine called *California Outlook* distinguished between the post-earthquake "substantial and sanitary" buildings and the earlier "tottering rookeries" that they replaced; the modern structures were evidence that the immigrants were becoming increasingly "wholesome," which to the writer's sensibilities meant more "American."<sup>6</sup>

This, and uglier language I do not care to repeat, expresses attitudes toward immigrant populations from all corners of the globe that were regrettably common at the time. Although the article's author professes that Americans were "coming to understand [the Chinese] better and value them more," he placed

---

<sup>6</sup> See *Western Architect and Engineer* (vol. 10), *Popular Mechanics* (April 1910), *Architecture* (Feb. 15, 1907), *A tour to San Francisco, California and return* (Rudolf J. Walther, 1916), and *California Outlook* (July 5, 1913).

the burden on the immigrants to make themselves known. China itself remained mysterious to most Americans; it was less open to travel, and its government refused to take part in world exhibitions as its neighbor, Japan, did.

At the start of the twentieth century, America's view of China would remain dim, and its architecture continued to be relegated to the status of mysterious exoticism. Like the traditions of other distant worlds, it would be burnished into the broader themes of Art Deco, especially for those kinds of buildings that housed recreational, even escapist, functions, like this central monument of Hollywood culture. Yet also, around the 1930s, instances of sensitivity and connection would suggest another option. The San Francisco Chinatown YWCA reveals a more serious engagement with Chinese traditions. Surely it is a "western" building in plan and function, but the towers, spires, details and imported tile reveal a greater depth of thought and less exotic spectacle than the fanciful Chinoiserie of earlier days and most post-earthquake design. It is less stereotypical, less facadish, more convincingly synthetic, and might reflect a softening of attitude also seen in the publication of China-themed novels by Pearl S. Buck, who would receive the Pulitzer Prize in 1932.

The Y was designed by Julia Morgan, the first woman to graduate from the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, where she learned the craft and discipline of studying traditional forms and modern methods, to devise buildings appropriate to their function and local communities. As *École* training appears to have opened a way for Westerners to successfully adapt principles of Chinese design, it also laid the groundwork for a new development of professionalism in China itself. During a progressive period in the early twentieth century during which China sought new western ideas, Chinese students traveled to Philadelphia to enroll at the University of Pennsylvania under *École*-trained Frenchman Paul Philippe Cret. Among their numbers was Lin Huiyin and Liang Sicheng, who would both make a lasting impact on the development of Chinese architecture upon their return in 1927, in part by establishing an architecture school modeled on the program at Penn. Liang's professional contributions have earned him the moniker "Father of Modern Chinese Architecture." Inspired by the *École* method of precedent study, Liang returned to China with a new appreciation for the preservation of traditional techniques and forms, which inspired his pioneering history of Chinese architecture based on traditions of wooden structures. He also shaped principles of modernization, making efforts to preserve the antiquities of Beijing in the midst of its twentieth-century development.

But the promise of progress—architectural or otherwise—was interrupted by a series of political and cultural convulsions. Opium, civil war, Colonialism, famine and the Cultural Revolution conspired to disturb life for the Chinese people and lead to the suspension of ties with the West. Some sources suggest that the

policies of the People's Republic, established in 1949, arrested professional development in China.<sup>7</sup> This need to fill a gap has been used to explain why western architects have been so welcome, once after ties were reestablished. This began in the early 1970s, when ping pong and panda bears were used as diplomatic tools in the cause of Chinese-American engagement.

By the 1980s the gates of cultural exchange were flung open. A dribble of western architects, and architecture study abroad programs, became a flood leading up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008. The case of Beijing is a special one, an example of the kind of city-wide, self-conscious transformation that has been attempted only a few times in history, for example sixteenth-century Rome under Pope Sixtus V and Napoleon III's Paris during the 1860s. While Rome and Paris both depended on homegrown architects to modernize within their established architectural traditions, Beijing took a very different path, one that magnified the possibilities and problems of westerners practicing in the east, as well as exacerbated the friction between development and preservation which is common in all cities, but amplified in Beijing.

With a feeling that modernity was best expressed by unprecedented novelty, Beijing's policy became a Western builder's dream: lavish opportunity, unbridled desire for invention and huge budgets, all of which are generally attractive, but especially so to architects who otherwise felt stifled by stagnant home economies, strict building regulations and lamentable public taste.

Such has been understood precisely by some of the most successful architects who built up Beijing. SOM's director of operations in China, Silas Chiow, described the opportunity this way: in China, he said, "people have no preconceived notion of what building development should be . . . That gives young architects an opportunity to try new ideas." He described China as "almost like an experimental laboratory for different architects." But what is one architect's laboratory is another architect's homeland. Beijing architect Peng Peigen reflects the notion that western firms are taking advantage, in his words, "using China as their new weapons testing zone."<sup>8</sup>

This certainly seems true of what is probably the most controversial of the so-called "vanity projects" or "signature buildings," the CCTV Headquarters by Rem Koolhaas.<sup>9</sup> There is no denying that the project is a structural marvel that uproots all expectations of what an office tower ought to look like. It is novel and shows great imagination, and has been praised by architectural and popular press worldwide. But it is not universally loved. Beijing architecture professor Xiao Mo, who says these "headquarters" look more like

---

<sup>7</sup> See *Washington Post* (15 December 2010).

<sup>8</sup> "Foreign architects put stamp on Chinese skyline," *By Keith B. Richburg, Washington Post* (14 December 2010).

<sup>9</sup> For specific discussion, see [http://www.danwei.org/architecture/rem\\_koolhaas\\_and\\_cctv\\_porn.php](http://www.danwei.org/architecture/rem_koolhaas_and_cctv_porn.php).



“hindquarters,” also described it as the cage for the bird who laid its egg on the opera hall and nests in the Olympic stadium.<sup>10</sup> Architect Peng believes that foreign architects abuse China, unloading on the country “stupid things [that] could never be built in their own countries, in this life, the last life or the next life.”<sup>11</sup>

This nationalistic sentiment was addressed by team assembled to design the National Stadium, which, at least at first, portrayed the blending of East and West through the happy partnership of a Swiss architecture firm working alongside a contemporary Chinese artist. Early in the project, Ai Weiwei contributed not only design elements but also a meaningful narrative to Herzog & de Meuron’s building; he also spoke in favor of foreign architects working in China, exposing local architects to western skills and making the country better-known to outsiders. But that has changed, and Ai now sees the Stadium as symbolic of problems with Chinese government, beginning with the fact that this \$423 million building was constructed by underpaid and socially marginalized migrant workers. In recent essays, the artist explains that he now sees the building as representing an unfulfilled promise for modernity—the kind that improves the lot of regular people.<sup>12</sup> The building, he says, is an emblem of a lie.

The Stadium is but one of the buildings that have or will be built in a city with precious little open space available for new construction. The legacy of the Olympics is not only one of unparalleled construction, but also unprecedented demolition. This kind of architectural devastation recalls mid-century America, for instance the so-called “slum clearance” in St. Louis that made way for tall towers to house the poor, and the slashing of cities like Boston with interstates that ran straight through their historic cores. This kind of development has led to social displacement, loss of historic fabric, and tremendous financial cost—not only in the cost of throwing away, rather than preserving and recycling, old building stock, but the further expenditure of fixing mistakes that replaced the original fabric. For example: the estimated price Boston will pay for its “Big Dig,” which buried Interstate 93, equals just under \$1,200,000 per linear foot of highway. Renewing the neighborhoods it displaced, and rebuilding the structures it obliterated, have no price tag, for they cannot be done.

Such destruction has been commonplace in Beijing, especially in the traditional *hutongs*. Acre upon acre of historic neighborhoods has been torn down in the name of progress, replaced by buildings which are perhaps necessarily large to accommodate contemporary and future needs for the numbers of sports fans, office workers, and apartment-dwellers who are being drawn to the city. Indeed cities must grow and adapt, with architecture that responds to new demands but does not obliterate cultural memory. Contemporary

---

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.danwei.org/architecture/rem\\_koolhaas\\_and\\_cctv\\_porn.php](http://www.danwei.org/architecture/rem_koolhaas_and_cctv_porn.php)

<sup>11</sup> See *Washington Post* (15 December 2010).

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.danwei.org/featured\\_video/ai\\_weiwei\\_the\\_birds\\_nest\\_and\\_b.php](http://www.danwei.org/featured_video/ai_weiwei_the_birds_nest_and_b.php)

Beijing cannot be accommodated in replications of imperial audience halls, and stretching their features to “traditionalize” tall office buildings has led to unsatisfactory results—as has ignoring these traditions altogether.

Beijing faces significant friction between development and preservation, capitalism and social justice, industrialism and environmentalism. It is all too easy to observe the problems inherent with China’s modernization from a privileged point of view. Americans may have a longer track record in facing these challenges, but this should give us pause, for our record is far from spotless. Rather, it should enhance our empathy with China as it develops, and as our countries become evermore entwined, and architects travel increasingly between the two. Such an attitude can make the most of the building opportunities available in China, allowing architects to utilize the experience of our numerous accomplishments and our many mistakes, in service of building better cities in China than perhaps the ones we are stuck with in America.

Ankle-deep in the twenty-first century, architects in the East and West face a host of challenges concerning matters as diverse as human rights and climate change, even before they start to think about the appropriate design for a new building. And these issues are above and beyond the considerable cultural distinctions that still, centuries into our relationship, are difficult to grasp.

My own experience traveling in Beijing is one of disorientation and dislocation. Prior to, and since, my visit, I have read a lot about the historic and contemporary city, to understand what I witnessed there. In 2008, for a week I tried to make sense of the visually-cluttered and suffocating hutong alleys and the cold, empty windy plazas of the Olympic Green coexisting in the same city. I marveled at the imposing lines of Imperial architecture, their retouched paint jobs still spit-shined and vivid, against the less-well-traveled parts of the Forbidden City that reveal the decay of empire. I tried to figure out how the aesthetics were working on me, and how I was equally moved by the formality of Dynastic architecture and the average life of hutong neighborhoods, and struggled with guilt that I was making another person’s poverty my picturesque pilgrimage, yet also wondering why my life does not admit of sword dancing in a giant public park while my husband meets his friends for sidewalk board game hour. That my understanding of this culture is really not much deeper than other western architects who have preceded me by centuries is not a comfort to me.

The history of western interchange with China is a long one, and one that shows regrettably and relatively slight moments of real cultural understanding. But comparisons between past and present may be helpful: to what extent is contemporary western practice in the East like the Jesuit and Baptist missionaries, implanting formally irrelevant architecture—although now our spiritual guide is drawn from an architectural zeitgeist rather than the Bible? Like those who indulged in Chinoiserie, do we exploit the exotic “otherness”

of this foreign culture since this distant land does not have the same degree of preciousness as our own history? Are architects today, like those of the nineteenth century, escaping crummy home economies and taking advantage of China's spending spree by building what they would just as soon build at home? The lack of a track record in answering these questions sufficiently is no reason to stop asking them, and perhaps it is the generation represented by the students in this room who will come closer to finding real solutions. While acknowledging different histories and traditions, we envision a shared future, and common goals, of building together to serve people who are not on opposite sides of a bifurcated globe, but neighbors connected by an ocean rather than divided by it, on one page.

© Jhennifer A. Amundson