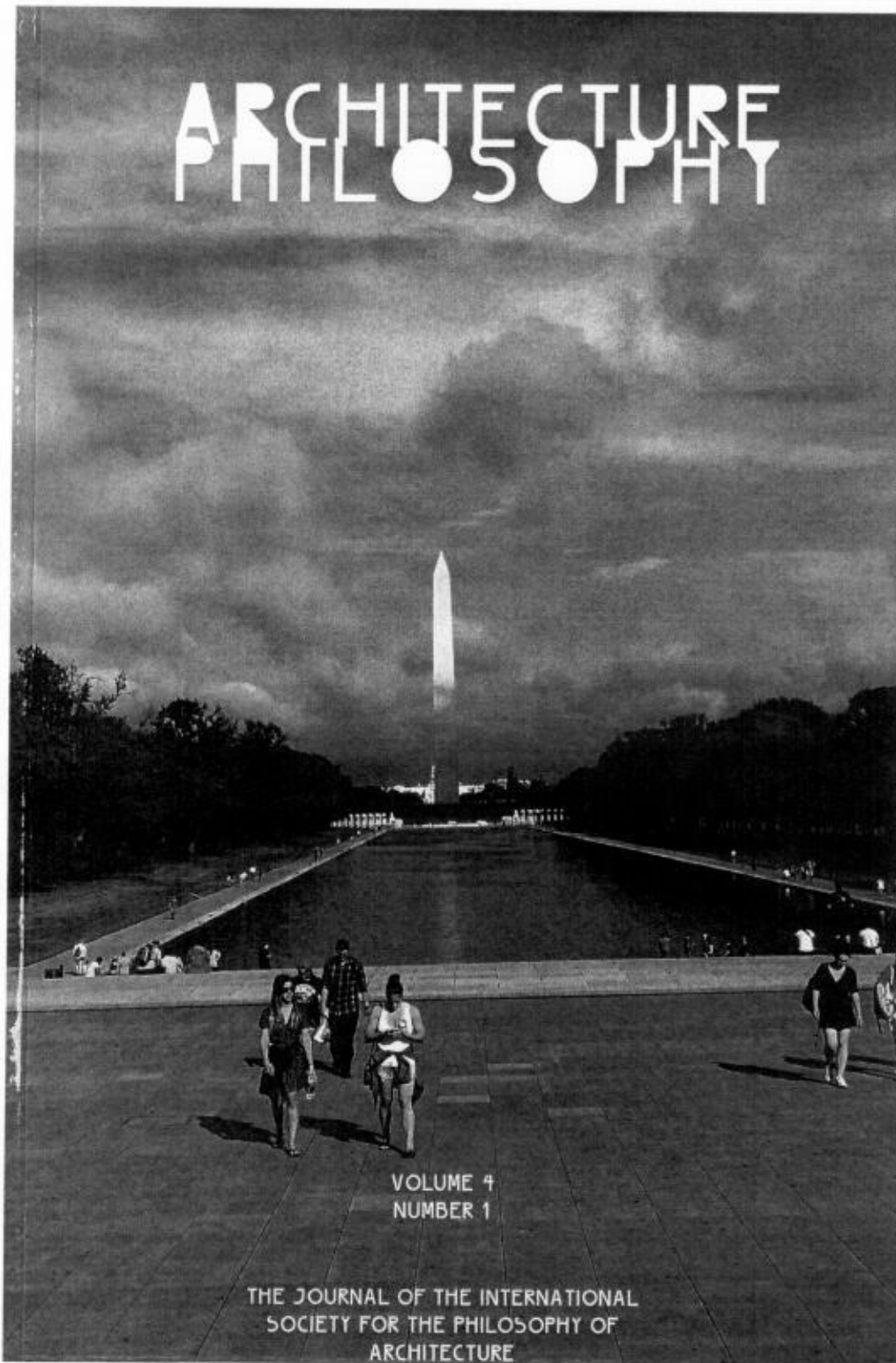


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## Book reviews

*A Chinese Philosophy of Architecture: Past, Present, Future*

David Wang

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In this book, David Wang attempts to derive a philosophy of architecture from Chinese sources. The attempt is made at a moment when revivals of old ways in China are once again discussed in academic literature (for example, Billioud and Thoraval in their *The Sage and the People: The Confucian Revival in China*, which appeared in 2015). Wang's book cannot be read as a textbook showing how to systematically apply certain Confucian or Daoist ideas to modern architecture. Instead, it should be read as a philosophical reflection on contemporary architecture delivered from a Chinese point of view. The book contains many fresh considerations and provocative ideas about how non-Western sources can challenge well-established Western architectural theories.

The book is divided into three parts: Past, Present, and Future. The first part explains traditional Chinese architecture and contrasts it with Western paradigms. The "Present" part is concerned with the opening of China towards the West and the influence of postmodernism. The "Future" part talks about influences like virtual reality but also about the possibility for future development of a Chinese philosophy of architecture.

On the one hand, the book is inspired by Jianfei Zhu's *Architecture of Modern China: A Historical Critique* (2009), which suggests a new "criticalist" approach to architecture. On the other hand,



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Wang does not address the theme of criticality that was important not only for Zhu but also for critics of Chinese architecture like Peter Eisenman who had once declared Chinese architecture conservative and accommodating because it lacks a tradition of resistance. For Eisenman, the critical consciousness linked to European Enlightenment is missing in the Chinese tradition.<sup>1</sup> Wang's comparative approach has a different starting point, which is not The Enlightenment but Plato. Wang wants to go back to the roots of all differences, which is Plato's essentialism and its absence in China. In particular, Wang employs Plato's distinction between matter and spirit to contrast Chinese philosophies of architecture with Western ones. Wang makes the following four distinctions:

First, in China, "excellence of being is not always dependent on infusions of moral value into material objects" (65) because the Platonic distinctions between matter and spirit do not exist in Chinese culture. This assertion put Chinese architecture on a completely different track missed by most Western architects.

Second, while the Confucian notion of the morally perfected person is important, the value of that person is entirely internal and will not manifest itself materially. Wang puts much weight on the quotation of a certain Wan Juren (source not documented) who would have written about Confucius's notion of ren that the virtuous nature is purely internal. According to Wan Juren, Confucius does not suggest that one should "externally pursue any kind of technical perfection or realization of material end," (5, the source is referenced as Zuangzi). The essence of things is not defined philosophically (as it was by Aristotle) and, as a consequence, no values or virtues can act on material or on architecture. Instead, "in China moral instantiation [remains] in between relational social roles" and the "moral focus is on people and their social enactments." (5) Chinese architectural conceptions are fluid because there are no essences like beauty or the good but everything depends on the social situation.

Third, in the West, spirit is individual, while in Chinese architectural thought spiritual components appear as constellations. Feng shui, for example, "is about losing human individuality into the larger cosmos." What matters is not the essence, but the "positioning alone assures beneficial outcomes" (5).

Fourth, the Platonic idea of reason leads to a concept of time-dependent progress towards ideals, which does not exist in China either. Due to its Platonic idealistic heritage, Materiality held negative

connotations as it is always opposed to the spiritual and non-material truth and able to retard progress. Therefore, Western architects attempted to introduce much non-material light, a goal not found in Chinese architecture, which is most obvious in Western religious architecture. (43)

Thus, with these four contrasts, Wang draws a sharp distinction in intent between Western Platonic essentialism and Chinese relational truths. But such an orientation invites the question: without such Platonic essences, some essential foundations, will those purely "relational" truths not lead to relativism? Wang offers a few provocative conclusions. For example, what is called pastiche style in the West cannot be called such in China because "Chinese philosophy accommodates this style of affairs." (6) Logically, you cannot have a pastiche unless you have some theoretical framework that informs what is not pastiche. There is no ideology of style in China, which means that anything goes as long as it is "relationally" justified: "prior to 1840, Chinese structures were not motivated by an ideology of style." (7) After 1840, there is a proliferation of styles but no indigenous theoretical tradition to guide design thinking. This is how the Chinese could reinvent postmodern hybridity without being postmodern. The hybridity we find in China is "not a self-conscious choice" and therefore not really postmodern (124) in conception. Instead it is simply due to a lack of purified aesthetic ideologies.

This relativism is pushed one step further when Wang legitimizes an aesthetics of clutter. Since there is no aesthetic ideology of proportion and since the *wen* (cultural pattern) is clearly open-ended, clutter becomes a positive term. The Chinese notion of *wen* is an untranslatable term meaning, in different contexts "pattern," "structure," "writing," and "literature." The pattern of *wen* is found not only in culture but also in animals, vegetation, and cosmological phenomena. Wang applies this

in an unusual context. The clutter on Chinese sidewalks is "teeming with activity" (66) and Wang holds that *wen* can be understood as "a cluttered array of things." (80)

106 In Chinese architecture, everything moves towards a fluidity-based paradigm, which can be contrasted with the essentialist styles of Western architecture in which purified or fixed notions of style tended to be justified by essentialist concepts of styles based on (Platonic-Aristotelian) philosophies. Chinese architectural reality is fluid as it is determined by the *yīng* and the *yáng*, which produces no essence but just *qi*. *Qi* is a cosmological notion providing coherence among all things. It translates as "breath" and is used in the sense of "energy flow" in traditional Chinese culture, especially Chinese medicine and martial arts.

After all those considerations of fluidity and interrelatedness one could perhaps conclude that Chinese architecture is organic. If this is the case, Wang could have developed this line of thought further. A fluid and dynamic perception of architectural space is precisely what organic architecture, initiated by Frank Lloyd Wright and developed by generations of architects, always wanted. Organic architecture promotes harmony between all elements, natural and architectural, precisely in the way in which Wang describes the *qi* flowing out of the play of *yīng* and *yáng*. As is, those tantalizing connections between East and West go unexplored.

It is in the context of fluidity that Wang also makes interesting statements about different preservation cultures in East and West. Fluidity-based architectural paradigms will find the preservation mentality pervasive in the West too restrictive: "In a correlative world in which fluid change is fundamental, wood gives way to fire, fire to soil, in a cyclical process." (23) Is the Daoist penchant "to let things be" (67) favoring preservation or against preservation? There is no clear answer to this in Wang's book.

However, in all his elaborations on fluidity and dynamism there is a paradox. European styles change while Chinese styles have remained relatively constant until the modern era. If architecture is so fluid in China, why did styles remain constant? Instead they evolved in non-fluid Europe. Stylistic evolution in the West owes much to an artistic self-consciousness arising out of the tradition of resistance of which Eisenman spoke. Wang acknowledges the stable character of Chinese architectural styles. His answer to the paradox of fluid architectural conceptions not bound by Platonic essences that nevertheless led to stylistic stasis is to explain the idea of fluidity within an overall largely static

conception by reference to the cosmic fabric called *fen*, which Buddhism-informed neo-Confucianism saw as a familial-social cosmic system guaranteeing unchanging social roles. (52) Each *fen* conducts itself in correct *li*-rituals. Similarly static are the *Yingzao Fasbi*, (營造法式) a 12th century manual of Building Standards, which formalized imperial construction as an expression of social hierarchy. Another reason for stasis is the imperative of moral excellence that philosophies about the *li* tended to express in the form of theoretical logic. Here Wang points to Xunzi, who believed that architecture can be subsumed under the embrace of *li*-ritual: "A benefit of this approach is that moral excellence is embedded in the theoretical logic." (143)

What seems to matter most for Wang is that there is no Platonic essence in Chinese thought able to formulate the good and the beautiful. Since nothing philosophical could be said about the goodness and beauty of material, Chinese literati never embraced architecture as a contemplative pursuit. Architecture was seen as a craft, which gave it a lot of freedom. This is possibly true. However, was the West that unfree? Ideas concerning the good and the beautiful have changed a lot over the centuries in the West. True, European culture tended to justify aesthetic truths in terms of philosophical truth (since Plato), which is not the case with the more vague Buddhist-Confucian prescriptions. At the same time, this lack of philosophical back-up might be the reason why, as Wang points out, modern Chinese architecture has not yet found its own vocabulary. (123)

I want to conclude by returning to the concept of the organic. Jianfei Zhu's "relational critique" seems to point more consistently to the idea of an organic whole. Wang also mentions Liu Xiaohu from Wuhan who uses terms like *feng shui* and *xiao* (filial piety) in organic contexts (143). The Hangzhounese architect Wang Shu is also often

mentioned as a protagonist of the “fluency” inherent in Chinese architectural culture. Would a real alternative architectural thinking moving beyond Platonism but incorporating “criticality” with the organic not be the next step in this search for a philosophy of Chinese architecture? Wang does not take this step. He derives a critique of the Western tradition from Chinese sources. However, calling this a “a Chinese philosophy of architecture” seems to be too ambitious. An aesthetics of clutter and fluidity-based paradigms can inspire interesting critiques but it will take more work to develop those critiques into real philosophies.

## ENDNOTES

1. Peter. Eisenman, “Critical Architecture in a Geopolitical World” in Cynthia Davidson and Ismail Serageldin (eds). *Architecture Beyond Architecture: Creativity and Social Transformations in Islamic Cultures*. London: Academy Editions, 1995.