

Jeffrey W. Cody, Nancy S. Steinhardt, Tony Atkin, eds., *Chinese Architecture and the Beaux-Arts*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press / Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2011, 385 pp..

**César Guillen Nuñez**

The catch phrase “clash of civilizations” has today become a part of political discourse, but as this publication by the universities of Hawai'i and Hong Kong show, with many an attractive illustration and persuasive arguments, appreciation, not conflict, between dissimilar cultures is not only possible but sometimes fruitful. Here a consideration of the divergent architectural systems of China and that of the French-derived Beaux-Arts architecture—and how the latter influenced and changed the other—provide readers with a fascinating account of why and how this cultural exchange occurred.

Jeffrey Cody points out in the second of his three introductory essays that the two systems in China and Europe “evolved independently, coherently, and divergently”. He further informs the reader that the timber-framed system of traditional Chinese architecture, “assumed that the individual designer should be relegated to the relatively obscure domains of building practice”. Actually, this is not terribly different from what was happening in medieval Europe, where it was not until the Italian Renaissance that the often—though not always—anonymous master builder would emerge as an independent architect. It established a Western system based on classical canons that had an elegant ramification in the 19th century Parisian École des Beaux-Arts' academy of architecture. By contrast, as Nancy Steinhardt remarks in her insightful essay in this book, in China traditional architectural practice continued practically unchanged from the mid-eight century up to the fourth decades of the twentieth century. But she also points out that there were certain principles of that architecture that were quite compatible with the French Beaux-Arts style. Although this is not a point that is strongly made in the book, it must also have been the sophistication of Beaux-Arts architecture that was particularly appealing to aspiring Chinese students, as indeed it was to others in various capitals of the world from Europe to Latin America at this time.

The version of the Beaux-Arts architecture that was most influential for Chinese students was that which developed in the early 20th century. Quite apart from its French roots, the latter resulted in very different constructions in the United States and in the Soviet Union. As regards the U. S., Tony Atkin's essay recounts how Chinese students acquired their knowledge of architecture mainly in the University of Pennsylvania. But there were other historic developments and the almost disparate versions of American and Soviet Beaux-Arts architecture, not all equally likable, which inspired young Chinese architects, is also examined in the book.

To leading architectural historians with a Victorian outlook, such as Sir Banister Fletcher, the unchanging nature of Chinese and so-called Eastern architecture was proof that their architectural systems were static and stagnant. It is perhaps no coincidence that an updated, more global and less biased 20<sup>th</sup> edition of Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture* should have appeared fairly recently in 1996. *Chinese Architecture and the Beaux-Arts* evidently attempts to contribute to the ongoing reevaluation of non-European architecture and cultures; indeed, in his

mentioned essay Jeffrey Cody implies that this is the case. In fact, this book shows how the more imaginative and adventurous young Chinese were not averse to change, as witnessed by the young pioneering students who went to study architecture in Europe and America from the end of the nineteenth century on. They included graduates who returned to China in 1927 and who set up schools of architecture incorporating Beaux-Arts principles. Beaux-Arts influenced buildings designed by Chinese architects not only in China, but eventually in the United States itself, during different 20<sup>th</sup> century historical phases, is also a witness to this great change.

Here the impact of the École's architectural teachings on the ancient Chinese system is examined in 15 essays by a team of international scholars. The majority are Western and Chinese architects, including experts such as Yung Ho Chang [张永和, Zhang Yonghe] is. These essays are divided into three parts, with the first one providing readers with an account of what Chinese architecture was like before and after the advent of Beaux-Arts architectural concepts. The second part, entitled "Convergence to Influence", consists of four main essays that look at how aspiring Chinese architectural students, for a number of historical reasons, of which the U.S. inspired Boxer Indemnity Fund was perhaps the most significant, were able to train abroad for the first time. They would later become the "First Generation" of architects who began to design novel buildings by adapting the mentioned modern Western notions to local traditions. The third part, entitled "Influence to Paradigm", forms the bulk of the book and is composed of nine essays that examines the consequences that Beaux-Arts education had on the activities and productions of Chinese architects like 董大酉 Dong Dayou (1899-1973) in Shanghai in the 1930s, as well as examples of soviet-influenced monuments and urbanization during the second half of last century. In view of the fact that he is Professor Emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania, there is a fitting Afterword, by Joseph Rykwert at the end.

On the whole the essays in this exceptional publication are original and instructive. There are, however, a few unconvincingly argued points that tend to indicate unawareness of the most up-to-date research. One such case is found in the essay by 赵辰 Zhao Chen on 梁思成 Liang Sicheng (1901-1972). Here the author compares the elevations of Chinese and Western buildings and chooses the façade of St. Paul's, Macao, as one of his representative examples to illustrate the "misinterpretation of the concept of elevation in Chinese architecture". Because he has evidently used outdated sources regarding dates of completion of the church, not only are his dates incorrect, but the surviving façade of the church is described and perhaps dismissed as "today a symbol of Portuguese colonization of Macao". This is ironic; to many of us the ruins have become rather a symbol of the kind of artistic collaboration that is possible in divergent civilizations and that *Chinese Architecture* celebrates with regards to Beaux-Arts architecture in China. However, these few shortcomings do not invalidate Zhao Chen's other arguments; nor do they diminish the novelty and value of a book that will appeal to both professionals and lay readers.