The increasing visibility of China on the world stage at the turn of the century has contributed to a torrent of publications and media features on the topic of Chinese architecture. Jianfei Zhu (2009a, b), a leading scholar in this field, has observed the phenomenon of Chinese architecture and produced significant publications internationally. His writings range from the ancient Beijing in Ming and Qing Dynasties (mid-eighteenth century) to the global practice in the Chinese cities in the twenty-first century, from building practice to Chinese and western philosophy. Intended to be ‘critical and historical’, this book collates his prominent works in the past few years. The 10 chapters are actually essays focusing on various problems ‘in an attempt to coordinate focused and long views, analysis and history, and issues of political production and formal logic’. Each essay deals with a ‘critical moment’, ‘in which one problem or one set of problems has emerged which deserves close investigation and theoretical reflection’.

With the aim of developing an analytical study of modern Chinese architecture across historical periods, these essays are arranged chronologically and critically. Three unique but clear analytical focuses are carried out in the book: social practice, historical condition and formal evolution across time and geography. Correspondingly, a series of critical problems are discovered and dealt with in these chapters. The chapters are as follows.

An introduction to the book is given in Chapter 1, which scans and scrutinizes the existing scholarships on modern Chinese architecture in both Chinese and English literature. This is quite useful for the ongoing study in this field. In the following eight chapters, the author provides a historical reading of specific times and problems. Chapter 2 mainly deals with the arrival of European sciences and visual-formal technologies after 1607 and in the 1730s and the following decades. ‘Form’ and ‘formlessness’ in analyzing the Euclidian geometry and linear perspective are presented as the first problems. Chapter 3 mainly deals with the arrival of the Chinese architects in the 1920s, the institutionalization of the profession, the ‘collaboration’ between the profession and the first nation-state of China in the 1930s in Nanjing and Beijing of the 1950s. The national capital of the People’s Republic is historically presented in Chapter 4. In Chapters 3 and 4, the second problem of power-knowledge interacts in the case of the profession working with state authority when the first nation-state of China was constructed in the 1930s and 1950s. In Chapter 5, a picture of design languages’ transition is depicted from the earlier and the Maoist time before 1976 to the decades of the 1980s and 1990s. The author points out various design languages’ transition is critically presented. Chapter 8 analyzes Beijing in 2008. And in Chapter 9, the author attempts to theorize the Chinese urban tradition revealed when returning to historical Beijing on the basis of Chapter 8. Modern European readings of Chinese traditions are discussed as mirror reflections before direct observations are made on imperial or historic Beijing (1420–1911). The final chapter offers a general reading of modern Chinese architecture of the twentieth century with five ‘mountain ranges’ and 20 ‘plateaus’. The author maps the 100-year architectural development of modern China in several charts that one has to admire the courage and vision of the author.

To thread these seemingly discrepant topics together in a book is by no means easy. Zhu (2009a b) tries to use subtitles to organize them in a line: form (West learning) – for the nation (nationalist project and revolution) – transition
(economic liberalization) – criticalities – in the world (globalization) – formlessness (Chinese characteristics) – in hindsight (overview). This line shows the author’s strong interests in the relationship of form, power, autonomy, criticality and geo-cultural difference.

Two points are highlighted in these chapters. One is the debate on ‘Criticality in between China and the West’ in Chapters 6 and 7, and the other is the ‘twenty plateaus’ in Chapter 10. In Chapters 6 and 7, attempts are made to discover different western perspectives on practice and Asia with the evidence in the work of Rem Koolhaas, Y.H. Chang, Jiakun Liu and Qingyun Ma among others in a geographical and cross-cultural perspective. In Chapter 10, the author is trying to build a broad framework for a general ‘modern’ architecture of China that crosses the times from 1840 to the present in China, and to explore some larger currents regarding styles and design positions.

As admitted by the author, these are specific problems arising from historical conditions in modern China. These problems share to a varying degree with other Asian countries and ‘peripheral’ or developing countries, in a structural relation and in contrast to the West. These problems are therefore useful for a further understanding of modern architecture in the non-western world. The author mentions finds that ‘two appear most basic of important in characterizing this modern architecture of the non-West and of China: relations with the West and alternative formulations of the critical’.

This is much more than a book on modern Chinese architecture history; it is rather a profound panorama of modern China, which completely embeds the subject of architecture into the socio-spatial context. Even more importantly, with his educational and working background in China in the 1980s, his doctoral studies in the United Kingdom in the 1990s and academic career at Australian universities, Jianfei Zhu (2009a,b) could freely hover in between the Chinese and western contexts and give a strong persuasive discourse throughout these chapters. His international perspective gives us a broader landscape on architecture of modern China.

References


Lesley L. Sun
Division of Building Science and Technology,
City University of Hong Kong,
Kowloon, Hong Kong