

On the (Mis)Use of Critical Discourse in Architecture: “Experimental Criticism” and its Entanglement with Postreform Art Movement in China

Post-reform China; Experimental Architecture; Criticism; Chinese Modern Art.

/Abstract

Tracing the origins of “experimental criticism” in China’s postreform architectural production, this essay interrogates the architectural criticism revolving around experimental architects that was formulated in China’s academic community during the early 2000s. Influenced by the Post-Cultural-Revolution liberal art movements, experimental architecture emerged as a marginal critique on political totalitarianism and cultural rigidity through installation-like, small-scale and conceptual projects. Despite its peripheral position in the state-regulated production system, experimental architecture was discovered and reframed by European curators as a revolutionary pioneer of contemporary Chinese architecture. While criticism has always been central to China’s architectural development since the early twentieth-century, experimental architects and their works were the first to be evaluated through the lens of criticism in the academic discourse, marking the emergence of architectural criticism in Chinese scholarship in the early 2000s. The hasty recontextualization of the Anglo-American paradigm of architectural criticism and the absence of an architectural theoretical framework in China have left cultural differentiations unelaborated, resulting in a heated debate over the political implication and social commitment in experimental architecture’s critical attitude. This essay argues that the specificities of experimental criticism are fundamentally shaped by the experimental architects’ deep entanglement with postreform art movement. And experimental criticism only became problematic after the quick and mediatized generalization of their works across cultural borders. Tracing the postreform origins and elaborating the conceptual nuances of experimental criticism that were lost, distorted and reconstructed in the cross-cultural appropriation of contemporary critical discourse to China, this essay further evaluates its specificities in a local context.

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While criticism, by an inclusive definition, has always been central to China's architectural development since the early twentieth century, it was seldom considered and debated in China's academic discourse. Since the 1920s and 1930s, when architecture as a modern profession and discipline was imported to China by the first generation of architects, Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin's compilation of ancient Chinese architectural history has exemplified an intellectual agenda that interrogated and criticized the Western-dominated framework of world architectural history.¹ In search of a "national form" (*mínzú xíngshì*), Socialist experimentations from the 1950s to the 1970s projected a constructed national identity through an arguably American-originated Modernist language to criticize the "capitalist forms" in European-Modernist architecture.² Despite these efforts, the critical discourse in architectural scholarship was not developed until the early 2000s. The "experimental architecture" that emerged during the 1980s and blossomed through the 1990s was the first to be evaluated through the lens of criticism in the academic discourse, signaling the emergence of architectural criticism as a distinct discipline in Chinese scholarship.

In 2005, the publication of Zhu Jianfei's article "Criticality in between China and the West" marked the first attempt to include contemporary Chinese practices in the Anglo-American framework of architectural criticism. Zhu's text triggered a widespread discussion on relevant scholarship and practices in China's academic community, resulting in the organization of a symposium on architectural criticism and in the release of a special issue by one of the most respected academic journals at national level. At the time, a small group of independent Chinese architects, known in China as the "experimental architects", was repetitively staged in art and architectural galleries in Berlin, Paris, Rotterdam, Milan and Dusseldorf,³ being frequently reported as "critical", "resistant" or "rebellious" in exhibition catalogs and periodicals.⁴ Meanwhile, the increasing awareness of world cultural inequity also nurtured new discussions in global architectural criticism, as reflected in the texts by Jane Rendell and Murray Fraser that appeared in *The Journal of Architecture* in 2005.⁵ These conditions dictated the background for Chinese practices to be discussed under the framework of criticism in the early 2000s. The critical discourse formulated by various overseas exhibitions and by Zhu's 2005 article was closely associated with the experimental

1 Shiqiao Li, "Writing a Modern Chinese Architectural History: Liang Sicheng and Liang Qichao", *Journal of Architectural Education* 56, no. 1 (2002): 35-45.

2 Ke Song and Jianfei Zhu, "The Architectural Influence of the United States in Mao's China (1949-1976)", *Fabrications* 26, no. 3 (2016): 337-356.

3 These exhibitions included "TUMU: Young Architecture of China" at Aedes Architecture Forum, Berlin; "Alors, la Chine?" at the Centre Pompidou, Paris; "CHINA Contemporary" at the Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, Rotterdam; "Unpacking Chinese Architecture: Tradition and Transformation" in Milan; "Bauen + Bauen: Contemporary Chinese Architecture" in Dusseldorf, etc.

4 See, for instance: Linda Vlassenrood, "Making Change Sensible", *China Contemporary: Architectuur, Kunst, Beeldcultuur* (Rotterdam: NAI, 2006), 41. Eduard Koegel and Ulf Meyer, "Positions Far from the Architectural Crowd", *TUMU: Young Architecture of China*, (Berlin: Aedes Architekturforum): 12-15. Chantal Beret, "Polarités Chinoises: Entre Epopée et Mémoire", *Alors, la Chine? Catalogue de l'exposition présentée au Centre Pompidou, Galerie Sud, du 25 juin au 13 octobre 2003* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 2003), 224.

5 Both Rendell and Fraser talk about the influence of cultural globalization on the western post-criticism, urging for more inclusive scholarship on non-western cultures to emerge. See: Jane Rendell, "Critical architecture: Introduction", *The Journal of Architecture* 10, no. 3 (2005): 227-228. And Murray Fraser, "The Cultural Context of Critical Architecture", *The Journal of Architecture* 10, no. 3 (2005): 317-322.

architects and their successors, even though they were nothing more than a small and marginal group of around 5-10 mid-aged, unlicensed designers, hardly representing the general condition of architectural production in China then dominated by state-owned design institutes. It was essentially through a transnational discursive construct that the experimental architects were framed as “critical”. Though the notion of “experimental” came from China’s experimental art movement at the time, and stood for a vague and seldom radical position that accommodated diversified practices, international curators and scholars replaced the term “experimental” with “critical” to describe the group and make it more recognizable in the West. The hasty recontextualization to China of a supposed critical discourse centered on experimental architecture caused wide disputes over the interrelationship between experimental architecture, contemporary architecture and architectural criticism for over a decade.⁶

In recent years, renewed attention on the postreform origins of contemporary Chinese architecture (the 1980s and 1990s) has drastically increased in western scholarship, with a more nuanced introduction of the term “experimental architecture” as a specific phenomenon in recent Chinese architectural history.⁷ The issues revolving around the relationship between the “critical” and the “experimental”, however, have never been fully resolved. Challenging existing research, this essay holds experimental architects’ deep entanglement with postreform art movement as the fundamental contribution to the specificities of experimental criticism, which only became problematic after the quick and mediatized generalization across cultural borders of the works attributed to those associated to the term. Tracing the 1980s and 1990s origins of criticism in the rise of architectural experimentation, this essay probes the conceptual nuances that were lost, distorted and reconstructed in cross-cultural terminological appropriation, and tries to evaluate locally contextualized specificities.

The Postreform Rise of “Experimental Criticism” in Architecture

After the end of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1970s, the 1980s in China marked the enactment of the opening-up policy under Deng Xiaoping’s regime. Ideological emancipation, economic boosts and social reforms quickly provoked cultural pluralism. The 1950s concept of “architectural creation” (*Jiànzhù chuàngzuò*), suppressed for being individualistic, capitalistic and unpragmatic during the decade-long cultural turmoil, resurfaced after architectural design was recognized as a “creative profession” by the Architectural Society of China

6 The debates between Zhu Tao, Zhu Jianfei, Wang Mingxian, Li Xiangning, Jin Qiuye, etc. are collected in the first four chapters of the book *New Observations* (Xīn Guānchá). See: Jian Shi, *New Observations: Anthology of Architectural Criticism*, (Tongji University Press, 2015).

7 See, for instance, Ding Guanghui’s paper, dissertation and book published between 2014 and 2016, including: Guanghui Ding, “Experimental Architecture’ in China”, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 73, no. 1 (2014): 28-37; Guanghui Ding, *Constructing a Place of Critical Architecture in China: Intermediate Criticality in the Journal Time+ Architecture*, (Routledge, 2016). See also other works revisiting 1980s and 1990s Chinese architectural production, including: Ying Wang and Hilde Heynen, “Transferring Postmodernism to China: A Productive Misunderstanding”, *Architectural Theory Review* 22, no. 3 (2018): 338-363. Ke Song, and Jianfei Zhu, “The Architectural Influence of the United States in Mao’s China (1949–1976)”, *Fabrications* 26, no. 3 (2016): 337-356.

(*Zhōngguó Jiànzhù Xuéhuì*).⁸ Eager to catch up with the western world both in practice and theory, many established scholars enthusiastically introduced post-modernism in mainstream professional journals, including *Architectural Journal* (Jiànzhù Xuébào) and *World Architecture* (Shìjiè Jiànzhù). Due to a long-standing disaffection with the dogmatic Beaux-Arts design system, Wang Tan, a professor at Tsinghua University, organized the translation of a series of books that to various degrees discussed postmodern design philosophies, including Eiler Rasmussen's *Experiencing Architecture*, Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*, Christian Norberg-Schulz's *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, and Charles Jencks' *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* and *What is Post-Modernism*. He also actively participated in the founding of unofficial organizations such as the Research Group for the Creation of Modern Chinese Architecture (Xiàndài Zhōngguó Jiànzhù Chuàngzuò Xiǎozǔ, 1984) and the Salon of Contemporary Architectural Culture (Dāngdài Jiànzhù Wénhuà Shālóng, 1986).

The obsession with postmodern theory in China left out the discussions on architectural criticism then dominating the American and European academic community. As Wang's student Lai Delin observes, the introduction of postmodernism in the 1980s was "open to pluralism but uncritical."⁹ Even until the 1990s, figures such as Michael Hays, Peter Eisenman, Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas were seldom mentioned in China's recognized scholarship, and thus had little direct impact on the country. In the meantime, the scene of postreform architectural design was still dominated by a Beaux-Arts-postmodern hybrid and by a "regionalist-late-modernist" approach in state-regulated design institutes.¹⁰ The combination of substantial investments with socialist aesthetic traditions led to the quick emergence of high-rises and over-large superblocks in big cities, collaging crude and disconcerting Chinese cultural elements and ultra-modern western imageries.¹¹ Criticism rarely appeared in the mainstream discourse of both design practices and academic circles. Foreign-based researchers in the late 1990s, including Zhu Jianfei and Rem Koolhaas, put their emphasis on the artificial and heterogeneous urban spectacle being built in China,¹² with little attention to the experimental architects, a marginal and scattered group that had already been publishing and practicing throughout the 1990s. Even until the last decade, describing it as "the shocking silence of the 1990s",¹³ domestic scholars still believed that the postreform architectural production was incapable of producing criticism for its detachment from contemporary literature and

8 Andong Lu, "Responsive Experimentalism 1978-2018: Evolution of Contemporary China's Architectural Experimentation and its Keywords", *New Architecture* 3 (2019): 40-45.

9 Quoted in Wang and Heynen, "Transferring Postmodernism", 341.

10 Jianfei Zhu, "Beyond Revolution: Notes on Contemporary Chinese Architecture", *AA files* 35 (1998): 3-14.

11 Zhu, "Beyond Revolution", 13.

12 See: Zhu, "Beyond Revolution". And Rem Koolhaas, Sze Tsung Leong, Chuihua Judy Chung, and Jeffrey Inaba, eds., *Great Leap Forward*, (Köln: Taschen, 2001).

13 Duan Yi, and Xiaodan Yang, "The Lost of Critique: Analysis of the Phenomenon of the Sociologism in Architectural Criticism Since 1990 in China", *Interior Design* 1 (2009): 7-10.

art movements.¹⁴ Indeed, the majority of the architectural community seemed to be “self-marginalizing”¹⁵ and distancing from the art world, eager to catch up with the “latest” design philosophy by absorbing imported theories without establishing a comprehensive epistemological framework. The experimental architects, however, kept a curious intimacy with modern artists and art events, exemplifying an alternative approach amid this vibrant and turbulent time. This essay argues that it was the close relationship between experimental architecture and postreform art movement, as well as the marginalized position of independent architects in the socialist production model, that determined the specificities characterizing the problematic “criticality” of the experimental architects and their successors.

The term “experimental architecture” came from the “Experiment and Dialogue: Seminar of Chinese Young Architects and Artists” (nán běi duì huà : zhōng guó qīng nián jiàn zhù shī yì shù jiā xué shù tǎo lùn huì). Held in Guangzhou on May 18th, 1996, this seminar was organized by Wang Mingxian, the deputy editor of the journal *Architect*, to officially bring together young, independent architects and avant-garde artists and to break through the conceptual stagnation in disciplinary development. Named after the prevalent “experimental art” of the time, the experimental architecture was deeply entangled with the thoughts, figures and events in the art scene. In 1979, the Stars Group (xīng xīng pài) hung its first unauthorized exhibition on the railings of Beihai Park, marking the beginning of a new and controversial art movement that developed into the '85 New Wave (85 Xinchao) which radically eradicated the ideologized art traditions under the socialist regime with new approaches. The artists experimented with bodily expression, performances, and sought rationality and individualism against the totalitarian ideology at the time. The success of the Stars Group not only brought politicized criticism into the art scene, but also encouraged artists and poets to form independent groups outside the state-regulated establishments.¹⁶ One of the most radical groups at the time, the Xiamen Dadaists Group led by Huang Yongping, deeply influenced Wang Mingxian, a proactive art and architecture critic who in 1986 organized various salons on postmodernism. As recalled by Wang, the salon was an opportunity for him to reach out to the emerging alternative architects, who later became the protagonists of experimental architecture.¹⁷ The ideological criticism rooted in the progressive literature and art works of the 1980s was later reflected in the writings and the practices of experimental architects. Struggling between the newly established western-style liberalist economy and the unchanged Communist centralist state, the modern art movement in China culminated in the *China: Avant-Garde* exhibition in February 1989, and was soon silenced by the authorities. In his capacity as exhibition curator, Wang included in the show also a few architectural projects by young

14 Wang, and Heynen, “Transferring Postmodernism”.

15 Mingxian Wang, and Jian Shi, “Chinese Experimental Architecture in the Nineties”, *Studies in Literature and Art* 1 (1998): 117-126.

16 Michael Sullivan, “Art in China since 1949”, *The China Quarterly* 159 (1999): 712-722.

17 Mingxian Wang, interviewed by author, July 2019.

and progressive architects. While these works did not receive much attention, they still indicated the close connection between emerging alternative direction in architecture and the rebellious ideals dominating the postreform art movement.

Another background promoter of the experimental architecture were the architectural competitions held in the 1980s. As art historian Gao Minglu points out, China's architectural experimentations lagged far behind China's art movement in time,¹⁸ for the production of architecture requires the support of investment, governmental policy and the social collaboration, and is never the sole creation of an individual. During the 1980s and the early 1990s, it was nearly impossible for freelance architects outside the state-owned design institutes to get commissions on their own. Competitions, on the other hand, provided an alternative approach for young architects to test their design philosophy on paper. Intrinsically different from the built projects, conceptual designs were not bound to pragmatic purposes, including function, budget and site. Determined by its medium, the prevalence of "architecture on paper" (zhǐ shàng jiàn zhù)¹⁹ marked the proliferation of conceptual projects characterized by symbolic formal operations, extravagant visual effects and artistic appropriations.

In a time when there was little chance to realize alternative designs, the young architects expressed their positions against the mainstream production model by retreating to writing and to the publication of conceptual designs. Both approaches were welcomed by Wang Mingxian, the protagonist in the promotion of experimental architects since he had begun working as an art critic and an editor. During his tenure at the journal *Architect*, Wang promoted the dissemination of alternative designs/approaches through the publication of critical texts and conceptual projects. Among them were Dong Yugan's "Sun and Monument" (tài yáng yǔ bēi),²⁰ a Cultural Revolution memorial hall with abstracted cultural symbols; Dong Yugan's "Furniture-Building", designed out of stacked bookshelves [Fig. 1]; Rao Xiaojun's critique of Zhao Bing's "Spatial Calligraphy" (kōng jiān shū fǎ); Li Juchuan's critique of the Parc de La Villette²¹; and the discussions on the appropriation of Western Modernism in Chinese cultural traditions and local construction methods by Liu Jiakun, Yungho Chang

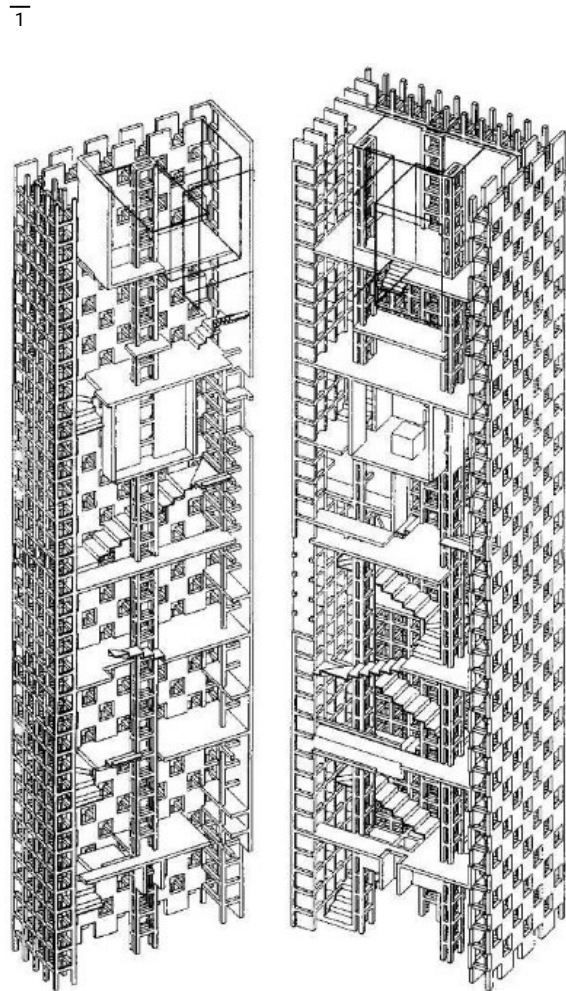


Fig. 1
Furniture-Building: Writer's House, designed by Dong Yugan, 1999. Zhaofen Zeng, "The "Experimental Architecture by Young Chinese Architects" Exhibition at the 20th UIA Congress", *New Architecture* 5 (1999): 69-70.

18 Minglu Gao, *Modern Chinese Art History (1985-1986)* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1991).

19 Lu, "Responsive Experimentalism", 40.

20 Yugan Dong, "Sun and Monument", *Architect* 2 (1996), 101-102.

21 Juchuan Li, "Parc de La Villette and Others", *Architect* 57 (1994): 79-83.

and Wang Shu.²² The journal, the symposium and the seminar provided a discursive platform to explore alternative positions before independent architects were able to enter the design market.

Influenced by the ideals and models of the modern art movement, these architects were combined under the designation of “experimental architects” by Wang Mingxian and Rao Xiaojun during the late 1990s.²³ The group was composed of several geographically scattered and middle-aged artist-architects without a unified position, though they all consciously distanced themselves from the commercialized stylizations, the rootless appropriation of postmodern theory and the symbolic revivalism that characterized China at that time.²⁴ Some of the architects, such as Liu Jiakun and Wang Shu, were prolific writers connected to the Chinese literati tradition; Li Juchuan and Zhao Bing had little interest in the built projects and were creative conceptual designers mobilizing cultural symbols; Yunggho Chang and Ma Qingyun had overseas education backgrounds and stood as intermediaries between distinctive knowledge traditions. Each of them explored the possibilities of alternative practices with different theoretical frameworks and design philosophies, as suggested by the vague appellation of “experimental architects”.

Their positions, therefore, could not be simply assumed as “avant-garde” or “criticism against the status quo”. As suggested by Rao Xiaojun, the “experimental-critical view” – as expounded by the “experimental architects” – differed profoundly in its ideological outlook from the Western notion of avant-garde. While the radical, absolute and holistic ideals of European avant-garde movements were for the most part anti-historical and anti-traditional, the “experimental criticism” was test-based by selecting, reorganizing, decomposing and reassembling the existing material; and through continuous dissection and reconstruction of the recognized criteria, it aimed for the unknown, while at the same time firmly rooting itself in the social realities.²⁵ Experimental architecture, therefore, sought to stimulate transformation under the existing social and institutional framework without the necessity for a subversive revolution or a new orthodoxy. The “experimental criticism”, as elaborated by Rao, was a flexible, vague, modest and even playful position that accommodated diverse approaches marginalized by the mainstream discourse. Stemmed from a culture apparently without critical traditions, experimental criticism integrated the tactful, unradical Chinese attitude towards change and the politicized criticism towards the dominating ideology that was influenced by the modern art movement. Wang applied the Zen Buddhist verse “A special transmission outside

22 See: Jiakun Liu, “Descriptive Discourse and Low-tech Strategy”, *Architect* 10 (1997): 46-50. Shu Wang, “Spatial Poetics: Notes on Two Architectural Designs”, *Architect* 61 (1994): 85-93. Yunggho Chang, “Two Spatial Relationship”, *Architect* 62 (1995): 60-64.

23 The initial members of the group included Yunggho Chang, Dong Yugan, Tang Hua, Wang Shu, Zhao Bing, Li Juchuan, Liu Jiakun, Zhu Wenyi, Xu Weiguo, as explained in Wang Mingxian's essay. See: Mingxian Wang, “Architectural Experiments”, *Time Architecture* 2 (2000): 8-11.

24 Wang, “Architectural Experiments”, 10.

25 Xiaojun Rao, “Marginal Experimentation and the Transformation of Architecture”, *New Architecture* 3 (1997): 20-21.

the teaching not based on the written word” (Kyōge betsuden, Furyu monji) to describe the organization and dissemination of experimental architecture.²⁶ Architects practicing the experimental-critical view, in fact, were more united by what they were against than by what they stood for. As Rao noted, “there are no set rules or methods; it’s just an attitude, a tendency to constantly innovate, and in the meantime, to eliminate itself.”²⁷ The movement of experimental architecture was marginal and self-marginalized and it did not aim for a clear-cut critical voice, either in practice or in theory.

The Mediatized Recontextualization of Experimental Architecture and its Discontent

Despite its peripheral status at home, the experimental architecture movement was nevertheless discovered and reframed by European scholars and curators in the early 2000s. Although the 1999 exhibition “Experimental Architecture by Young Chinese Architects” at the UIA Conference in Beijing was shut down as a result of state censorship, the German architectural critic and curator Eduard Koegel was fortunate to observe the works of the staged architects in the half-closed exhibition hall.²⁸ In 2001, Koegel brought some of the experimental projects to the Aedes Architecture Forum in Berlin where the display of this group of mostly marginal Chinese architects caused immediately an international sensation. Under the title of “TUMU: Young Architecture of China”, the exhibition at Aedes staged the newly built works of nine architects, including those from a younger generation born in the late 1960s and 1970s, as well as an artist, Ai Weiwei. The exhibition was held with a clear purpose: as it was emphasized in the press release and in the catalogue, it aimed to promote the independent architects as the emerging and rebellious force signaling “the first promising hints for the development of an independent architectural language”²⁹ that would “contribute to the renewal of Chinese architecture.”³⁰ In local newspapers the works and figures on display were presented as being part of a “revolution”.³¹ As the show’s curator recalled, the organizers of the exhibition intentionally abandoned the existing Chinese term of “experimental architects” in order to “free it from the experimental situation” and to cause a “bigger impact”.³² Although the curators were not directly referring to “avant-garde” or “critical” architects, the discourse framing them was modified from Rao’s original description of the late 1990s. The Chinese critics, Rao and Wang, perceived the experimental architecture

26 Wang, interviewed by author, July 2019.

27 Rao, “Marginal Experimentations”, 21.

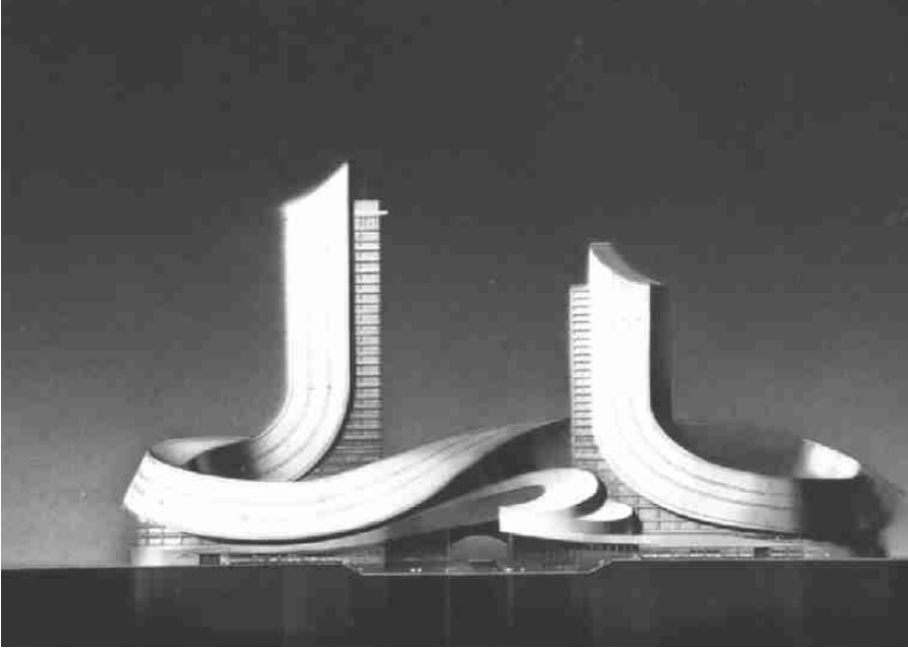
28 Eduard Koegel, trans. Hang Su, “The Perception of Chinese Architecture in the West: TU MU - an Exhibition at the Aedes Gallery in Berlin and its Context”, *Time Architecture* 2016 (2): 26-30.

29 Aedes East Forum, “Press Release ‘TU MU - Young Architecture from China’”, (Berlin: Aedes East Forum, 2001).

30 Eduard Koegel, and Ulf Meyer, “Positions far from the Architectural Crowd”, *Tu Mu: Young Architecture of China: Ai Wei Wei, Atelier Feichang Jianzhu, Liu Jiakun, MRMADA, Wang Shu, Nanda Jianzhu* (Berlin: Aedes East Forum, 2001): 12-13.

31 Hans Wolfgang Hoffmann, “Bausteine einer Revolution”, *Frankfurter Rundschau* September 27, 2001.

32 Eduard Koegel, interviewed by author, March, 2019.



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as the uncertain, marginal negotiations with the status quo, emphasizing the experimentation for new possibilities. The German exhibition, on its part, framed the emerging practices as a sort of manifesto, quickly bringing experimental architecture into controversy and criticism.

Compared to "TUMU", the 1999 exhibition curated by Wang Mingxian was more centered on conceptual projects and unbuilt works. Dong Yugan's "Furniture House", a residential building composed of stacked bookshelves, explored the ontological issue of space, architecture and artifacts. Zhao Bing's Calligraphy Series [Fig. 2] sought to generate architectural forms through the flow of written Chinese characters. Absurd yet thoughtful, Zhao's work tested the Chinese artistic metaphysics in design operation. The rendering of Yunggho Chang's gallery project was displayed amidst a traditional Chinese ink and wash painting [Fig. 3], challenging the relationship between modernist architectural

Fig. 2
Calligraphy Series", designed by
Zhao Bing, 1998. Xiaojun Rao,
"Experimental Architecture: a
Conceptual Exploration," *Time +
Architecture* 2 (2000): 12-15.

Fig. 3
China Small Contemporary
Gallery, designed by Yunggho
Chang, 1999. Zhao Fen Zeng,
"The "Experimental Architecture
by Young Chinese Architects"
Exhibition at the 20th UIA
Congress", *New Architecture* 5
(1999): 69-70.



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form and the indigenous cultural environment. The exhibition even included a video on Yuanming Yuan filed by Qiu Zhijie and Zhan Wang. The exhibited works, therefore, implicitly criticized and reflected over the mainstream ideology and the existing production model through formal language and visual effects. Whether the projects were pragmatically built was irrelevant, nor were functionality, budget, or social engagement considered. The German exhibition “TUMU” strictly requested all displayed projects to be built works [Fig. 4], even though most of the independent architects were still at an early stage of their professional careers and had no more than one or two built projects in their portfolios. Starting from there, the curators foregrounded pragmatic issues such as the emerging privatized design market, the new production model, and the pedagogical revolutions, to demonstrate the possibilities kindled by these architects. While the 1999 exhibition blurred the disciplinary boundary between art and architecture and presented the ideological critical character of architectural experimentations like art installations, the German show collected built works from architects of a wider age range without distinguishing the generational difference between them, and foregrounded them as hints of a forthcoming revolution over the existing production system. The sole focus on built works, to a certain extent, distorted the original intent of experimental criticism in Rao’s late 1990s text. Conceptual artist-architects Zhao Bing and Li Juchuan were not included and gradually faded out of sight, though they made indispensable and inspiring contributions to the movement of experimental architecture during the late 1990s.

The discourse initiated by “TUMU” soon disseminated across European countries, leading to the organization in the Old Continent of a series of exhibitions on contemporary Chinese architecture that focused on independent Chinese

Fig. 4
exhibited works at “TUMU: Young Architects of China”, Aedes Architecture Forum, Berlin, Germany, 2001. Courtesy of Aedes Architekturforum, Berlin.

architects with alternative positions, thus inaugurating a recognition of the experimental architects in both China and the rest of the world. As reflected in subsequent exhibitions in Paris, Rotterdam, and Milan, and in journal issues published in Germany, Switzerland, Japan and Italy, the experimental architects and their successors were acknowledged for their intentional distancing from the mainstream socialist production model as well as for their critical reflection over Chinese traditional legacy and Western references.³³ In 2005, Zhu Jianfei published the article “Criticality in between China and the West” in *The Journal of Architecture* explicitly framing the experimental architects’ practices in the western “critical/post-critical” discussion for the first time.³⁴ Zhu’s text compared Peter Eisenman’s critique on western world’s critical posture which projects itself on Asia, and Rem Koolhaas’s research on the pragmatic urgencies in China’s urban development which urges for a more comprehensive understanding of the emerging critical practices from the perspective of cross-cultural communication. The rise of the “autonomous, critical, and discursive architecture” exemplified in his article not only included first-generation experimental architects like Yung Ho Chang, Liu Jiakun, Ma Qingyun and Wang Shu, but also younger private firms such as Atelier Deshaus. While Zhu saw China as “the largest exporter of the impetus that is effectively ‘post-critical,’”³⁵ he briefly described the architects’ basic design strategies without any in-depth discussion on where their criticality lay. Zhu’s description of the experimental architects as “making a breakthrough in a country that has been dominated by decorative social-realism originating from the Beaux-Arts tradition”³⁶ put more emphasis on the stylistic and spatial qualities, and therefore differed from the social-and-culturally engaged criticism stemming from a western Marxist tradition.

The position exemplified in Zhu’s article aligned with the discourse constructed by the European exhibitions, prioritizing visual properties and conceptual novelty over pragmatic and situated issues, as characterized by the mediatized nature of curatorial narratives. Clearly, Zhu’s article was geared towards an English-speaking audience that was familiar with some traditions of western knowledge but had little to no information on emerging Chinese architectural practices. It is understandable that Zhu applied the “critical/post-critical” theoretical framework to communicate the Chinese situations effectively, but the article was also problematic in its articulation of the critical attitude of the experimental architects. Zhu’s text caused immediate controversies in the domestic academic community, resulting in a forum organized by the editorial team of the professional journal *Time + Architecture* (shí dài jiàn zhù). The subsequent special issue, published in 2006, marked one of the first official

33 See, for instance: *Bauen in China: Archithese: Zeitschrift und Schriftenreihe für Architektur* 6 (2004). Luis Fernández-Galiano, *China Boom: Growth Unlimited*, (Madrid: Arquitectura Viva, 2005). *China Overview: Area 78*, (Milano: Federico Motta editore, 2005). Stichting Archis, Office for Metropolitan Architecture, and C-lab (Columbia University Graduate School for Architectural Broadcasting), *Ubiquitous China: Volume 8* (Amsterdam: Archis Foundation, 2006).

34 Zhu, “Criticality”, 485

35 *ibid.*

36 Zhu, “Criticality”, 487.

discussions on architectural criticism and critical practices in contemporary China.³⁷ It was a timely collection of diverse positions in relation to Zhu's 2005 article, not only presenting the opinions of Chinese scholars, but also including commentary texts from major Anglo-American theorists and critics including Peter Eisenman, Michael Speaks, Joan Ockman, and George Baird. This issue started the appropriation of Anglo-American critical paradigms into the critique of Chinese contemporary practices, even though the object of criticism was confined to the small group of experimental architects and their successors.

American critics were more open-minded towards Zhu Jianfei's article, seeing experimental architecture as "strategic thinking" and "design intelligence,"³⁸ and affirming the potential of the emerging practices in challenging the mainstream critical discourse in the Western world.³⁹ A Chinese critic, Zhu Tao, then a doctoral candidate at Columbia University, explicitly questioned the notions of criticism adopted by Zhu Jianfei's article as "value-free explorations of architectural language" with "generalized liberal political preference." Tao Zhu problematized what he deemed as an elitist tendency to popularize independent architects in media, which in turn mobilized artistic creativity as cultural capital in the emerging design market and fueled the formulation of a "bourgeois" discourse that suppressed mass culture. Zhu Tao stated that, without social engagement and environmental concerns, the experimental architects were uncritical by nature for they left out the pressing issues plaguing most of Chinese society.⁴⁰ Zhu Tao was not the only scholar who pointed out experimental architects' lack of social responsibility in practice. Sun Jiwei, for instance, criticized experimental architecture as "high jump without gravity,"⁴¹ since the conceptual novelty and aesthetic values were accomplished without pragmatic concerns. Peng Nu and Zhi Wenjun, the chief editors of *Time + Architecture*, also noted experimental architects' uncritical stance for their tendency to bypass societal orthodoxy by sheltering themselves in the aesthetic realm and, therefore, lacking a social commitment as their counterparts in the West.⁴² The protagonists at the center of these critiques were aware of their situation as well. One of the representatives of experimental architects, Yunguo Chang, acknowledged the importance of social responsibility but also argued that social betterment is a mission far beyond the architects' possibilities and capacities. To take an intermediate position, Chang described his critical stance as "the third criticality", in between politicized criticism and social commitment and returning to the physicality

37 The only introduction to architectural criticism available to Chinese readers before the 2006 issue was an article by French critic François Chaslin published on *World Architecture* in 1999, which provided a general definition of architectural criticism without articulating the major figures and positions worldwide. The text did not consider China's specific situations and apparently did not prompt any discussion. See: François Chaslin, trans. Xinan Su, "Situation of Architectural Criticism", *World Architecture* 6 (1999): 60-66.

38 Michael Speaks, "Ideal, Ideology, Intelligence in China and the West", *Time + Architecture*, 91/5 (2006): 63-65.

39 George Baird, "The Criticality Debate: Some Further Thoughts", *Time + Architecture*, 91/5 (2006): 62-63.

40 Tao Zhu, "The 'Criticality' Debate in the West and the Architectural Situation in China: Thoughts on the Essay 'Criticality in between China and the West'", *Time + Architecture* 91, no.5 (2006): 71-78.

41 Quoted in Guanghui Ding, "Constructing a Critical Discourse: Time + Architecture and contemporary Chinese Experimental Architecture", *Time + Architecture* 3(2018): 116-120.

42 Nu Peng, Wenjun Zhi, "A Mosaic of Contemporary Experimental Architecture in China: Theoretic Discourses and Practicing Strategies", *Time + Architecture* 5 (2002): 20-25.

and materiality of architecture.⁴³ Chang's "criticality" made clear that notions of criticism derived from Marxist theory, as called for by Zhu Tao, were not on the agenda of experimental architects from the start.

The controversies over the supposed critical nature of experimental architecture during the early 2000s, whether appreciative or skeptical, indeed ignored the fact that the positions of experimental architecture derived from its 1980s and 1990s entanglement with the modern art movement in China. The "experimental criticism", therefore, should not be judged solely from its social engagement. The popularization of experimental architecture, primarily through overseas exhibitions, was media-saturated in nature and created a discourse that was easily turned into a creative asset for the emerging real estate developers. This situation further problematized the relationship between independent architects and the "critical" label they carried – and perhaps still carry – in the academic discourse. The visual and conceptual properties of experimental architecture, as captured and rendered "critical" by international scholars and curators, characterized the specificities of "experimental criticism", and could only be comprehensively understood by tracing its inseparable interrelation with the modern art movement.

Architecture or Art Installation? Specificities of Experimental Criticism

The postreform art movement shaped the outlook and production of experimental architecture in two ways. On the one hand, most architects' activities were decisively filtered through the personal background, critical perspective and assessment criteria of their key promoter, Wang Mingxian. On the other hand, most experimental architects were themselves enthusiastic about the latest trends in the avant-garde art community and engaged in critical approaches in their conceptual and practical design endeavors.

Wang Mingxian actively initiated the gathering of the first members of experimental architects under the influence of '85 New Wave art movement, organizing the young figures who positioned themselves outside the official system through seminars, exhibitions and journal publications throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. An editor with a background in Chinese Literature during the 1990s, Wang was exposed to liberal art and literature from a very young age. Even when progressive academic and cultural activities were entirely silenced during the Cultural Revolution, Wang managed to have access to Western Modernist poetry, literature and artworks that were secretly circulating among the intellectuals. During his university education in the 1980s, Wang passionately breathed the liberal reforms led by various artistic and literary groups in Xiamen, including the famous radical Xiamen Dadaists. After he arrived in Beijing, Wang developed a particular interest in modern architecture through the public lectures organized by the editorial team of the journal *Architect*, for

43 Yunguo Chang, "Criticality or What the West Meant to Me", *Time + Architecture*, 91/5 (2006): 66-67.



which he later served as the deputy editor.⁴⁴ Wang not only coordinated the first exhibition on experimental architects at Beijing UIA Conference in 1999, but also edited and published a series of anthologies exclusively dedicated to the promotion of experimental design philosophy, including Yungho Chang's *For a Basic Architecture* (jī běn jiàn zhù), Wang Shu's *Beginning of Design* (shè jì de kāi shǐ), Liu Jiakun's *Now and Here* (cǐ shí cǐ dì), Cui Kai's *Projects Report* (gōng chéng bào gào), and Tang Hua's *Building Utopia* (yíng zào wū tuō bāng). In a time when architects were anonymous cogs in the huge system of state-owned design institutes, the anthology signaled the emerging consciousness of architects as creative authors, even though most independent architects had completed very few works at the time. Wang was not only an editor, curator and critic, but also the connoisseur and sponsor of experimental architecture.

Wang's background, interests and experiences deeply affected his criteria for selecting, assessing and critiquing the alternative architectural works. For instance, he saw Wang Shu's sensational and improvisational works as "architectural Dadaism", and read Yungho Chang's black bicycle wheels applied in the Xishu Bookstore project [Fig. 5] as "weird signs".⁴⁵ Wang deciphered architectural works in terms of formal operations, spatial experiences, visual effects and symbolic connotations. In his commentary texts, Wang discussed how novel experiences were created, how culturally symbolic forms were generated, and focused on the creative process rather than on the end-product. He also explicitly noted that the development of experimental architecture, despite its dubious positions, had to be understood as part of the modern art movement,⁴⁶ praising architects like Yungho Chang for having "[...] demonstrated in-depth understanding of avant-garde art." Wang's efforts and attitudes towards a possible reform of Chinese architecture indicated his understanding of experimental architecture as experiential installations rather than design and building activity with practical or functional purpose.

44 Wang, interviewed by author, July, 2019.

45 Wang and Shi, "Chinese Experimental Architecture": 117-126.

46 Wang, interviewed by author, July, 2019.

Fig. 5

Xishu Bookstore, designed by Yungho Chang, 1993. Courtesy of Atelier FCJZ archive. <https://www.fcjz.com/archive/p/5b4720396918e75d6-d70822f.chive/p/5b4720396918e75d6d70822f>.



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The architects themselves kept up closely with the modern art movement too. As recalled by Wang Mingxian, Wang Shu, one of the core members of the experimental architects, eloquently lectured at the 1988 architectural salon, invoking the courage to “wrap up the Mausoleum of Chairman Mao” as Christo and Jeanne-Claude did with the Berlin Reichstag. Liu Jiakun’s first built projects were the studios he designed for his artist friends Luo Zhongli and He Duoling. Another architect, Yungho Chang, invited avant-garde artists including Wang Jianwei, Sui Jianguo and Song Dong to his newly established studio after its renovation. In a time when independent architects seldom received commissions, Chang explored a series of conceptual designs redefining traditional Chinese visual and spatial culture while communicating with the artists. For instance, in one of his projects, Chang selected and transformed sixteen Chinese characters from the Kangxi Dictionary⁴⁷ into spatial orders. In a text published in 2006, Chang explicitly noted that his critical stance derived from both the suppression lived under the Cultural Revolution and the avant-garde artists – Marcel Duchamp, Flann O’Brian, and Chantal Ackerman among others – he had learned about thanks to his education in the United States.⁴⁸ Chang’s works and writings explained why the architects favored cultural symbolism and formal manifestations over social considerations in their experimentations. As reflected in their works and speeches, the architects were critical against totalitarian political systems on the one hand, and against a rigid cultural climate on the other. In this sense, the outlook of experimental architecture kept in line with the goals and the approaches of the modern art movement.

47 Kangxi Dictionary is an authoritative dictionary named after a famous emperor during the Qing Dynasty in 1897.

48 Chang, “Criticality”, 66.

Fig. 6

Xiangshan Campus, designed by Wang Shu, 2000. Courtesy of Amateur Architecture Studio.



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Stemming from a transitory historical background and practiced by a specific group of people, what we could call “experimental criticism” catalyzed heterogeneous and inspirational designs, artworks and theories seeking alternative possibilities to crack the dominant production and academic system. However, this particular critical orientation also led to problematic practices. The cultural symbolism of crude and indigenous textile, for instance, sacrificed the original sense of scale of the material, as Wang Shu’s Xiangshan School Campus project made evident [Fig. 6]. The overlarge curve of the roof, covered with small pieces of roof tiles, created a novel yet awkward scene owing to their formal incompatibility. Dong Yugan’s signature red-clay-brick architecture also mismatched the building materials with the architectural structure, exaggerating the visual impact yet neglecting the architectonic logic [Fig. 7]. The loss of scale was also reflected in the appropriation of western architectural languages. Luo Zhongli’s studio, for instance, was designed with “a Guggenheim-style path” [Fig. 8], as the architect

Fig. 7

Qingshui Huiguan, designed by Dong Yugan, 2003-2006. Accessed February 14th at: <http://www.redbrickartmuseum.org/>.



Liu Jiakun described,⁴⁹ which appeared somewhat cold, monumental, alienated and inappropriate for a private house. Ma Qingyun's projects including Well Hall (Jingyu) and Father's House (Yushan Shichan) were loaded with extensive use of traditional Chinese materials, architectural forms and symbols. The intensified imagery legibility of these projects consolidated Ma's position as the representative of contemporary Chinese architecture in Western media. Prioritizing formalistic operations over pragmatic concerns, experimental architecture developed starting from the 1980s and 1990s installation-like experimentations that were on the one hand relatively weak on the practical aspects of construction, sense of scale, or functionality and on the other obsessed with the mobilization and appropriation of both modernist architectural forms and Chinese cultural symbols. Although the discrepancies of these experimentations were undeniable, their design philosophies and conceptual ideas were visually identifiable in photographic representations and easily communicated across cultural borders through texts and images. As a result, experimental architects quickly attracted European scholars and curators for both their "critical" positions and the visual legibility of their works. One of the earliest members of the group, Wang Shu, was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 2012, as an acknowledgment of "the role that China will play in the development of architectural ideals."⁵⁰ As one can infer from the above analysis, the so-called experimental criticism seemed to favor uncertainty, tentativeness and flexibility over aggressive radicality, exemplifying a moderate critical stance that stemmed from China's traditional intermediation between architecture and installation art.

It should be reinstated that the rise of a critical discourse in China, centering on experimental architecture, was in the first place determined by a Western perspective. Critical debates in the early 2000s focused apparently on built projects that had been recognized and selected by European scholars and curators, somewhat sidelining the more conceptual schemes and artistic works that Rao Xiaojun and Wang Mingxian had originally espoused and promoted.

49 Quoted in: Dong Li, and Tiecheng Xu, "Three Narratives about the Past Ten Years in the View of Critique: the Analysis of the Criteria of China Contemporary Architects", *Architect* 6 (2010): 22-27.

50 Grace Ong Yan, "The Infinite Spontaneity of Tradition", accessed July 28, 2020, <http://www.pritzkerprize.com/2012/essay>.

Fig. 8

Luo Zhongli Studio, designed by Liu Jiakun, 1994. Courtesy of Jiakun Architects.

The controversy generated by Zhu Jianfei's 2005 article brought China's contemporary architectural production into the world's theoretical and critical arena and set the discursive foundation for ensuing discussions mostly based on an Anglo-American critical framework. The consequences were felt locally too: as Hong Kong scholars Laurent Gutierrez and Valérie Portefaix have recently pointed out, the "duality" of building in China and exhibiting abroad contributed greatly to the acceptance of alternative architectural discourses at home.⁵¹ Under these circumstances, the previously marginalized theoretical and practical production of experimental criticism was also gradually recognized in the domestic academic community in part because it had first entered the Western academic discourse. The hasty recontextualization of West-centered critical discussions and the relative absence of a locally established architectural theoretical framework left in this process many conceptual nuances unelaborated.

In addition, inspired by conceptual and installation art in postreform China, experimental architecture positioned itself within the avant-garde movement, for it criticized the totalitarian production system and the cultural rigidity through formal expression, cultural symbolism, and spatial qualities based on empirical knowledge and bodily experiences. As asserted by Rao Xiaojun, criticism expressed by experimental architects refused "[...] to suppress architecture in the history of society and culture, asserting that architecture is an autonomous language and denying that it is a reflection of the reality."⁵² Rao made it clear that experimental architecture intentionally distanced itself from functional considerations and social engagement, partly as a result of systematic suppression from the state-regulated production model at the time. Perceiving architecture as a cultural production like literature and art, in their criticism experimental architects were less committed to social betterment than to the politicized interrogation of the status quo in general, creating novel experiences and testing conceptual ideals. Dong Yugan's conceptual design "Sun and Monument", for instance, mobilized allegorical symbols as a preposterous metaphor for the political trauma of the Cultural Revolution. Unfortunately, although many of these works were created through architects' interactions with artists and poets, most of them seemed to express a less critical position than the artworks, in part because of the inevitable social and functional nature of architecture.

Another fundamental feature of the so-called "experimental criticism" stemmed from its deep embedment in the cultural context of China, where the term "critical" tends to imply antagonism and possesses a rather confrontational connotation compared to the more moderate term "experimental". "Experimental criticism", therefore, indicated at once flexibility and ambiguity of interpretation. As observed by French sinologist François Jullien, the Chinese "critical" view allows for a stance of deference that nevertheless marks a difference. It implies "a readerly contract to be attentive to a play between the said and the

51 Quoted in Guanghai Ding, "Reformulating a critical process: architectural exhibitions in the journal *Time + Architecture*", *Time Architecture* 1 (2019): 178-181.

52 Rao, "Marginal Experimentations", 20.

unsaid.”⁵³ The discussion around the critical nature of experimental architecture that emerged around 2005 and 2006 did not explore the specificity of criticism in the Chinese cultural context, but directly appropriated the “critical/post-critical” debate, that is, only a small portion of the Western tradition of criticism. As a result, the lack of a localized dimension limited a comprehensive evaluation of experimental criticism in China. As Stanislaus Fung warns, the use of foreign terminologies might sometimes “disorient” cultural mediation, because of the ambiguity of concepts, the partial ability to grasp nuanced arguments, and the hypostatization of gestures of thinking into static “information”.⁵⁴ While radical criticism might be incompatible with Chinese’s habitual attitude towards change, experimental criticism presented itself as more performative than constative. Anchoring to Chinese cultural conventions the criticism that experimental architecture tried to express not only adds nuance to the understanding of a cultural movement that still remains little known, but also casts a light on a case that stands out within the history of architectural criticism for its originality.

It should also be noted that the development of experimental criticism relied heavily on the effort of promotion by very few protagonists, especially by Wang Mingxian, who was at the core of a loose network across the country that later developed into the group of experimental architects. While experimental architecture was very marginal at that time, as pointed out in several passages in this article, the seminars, exhibitions and publications organized by Wang constituted an academic environment outside the mainstream system within a small circle, allowing experimental ideas to circulate and be exchanged. Wang’s upbringing, educational background, personal interests, occupational advantage and connections formed the basis on which experimental works and theories were selected, discussed, and disseminated. His perspective and criteria for judging architecture were inevitably imprinted by the cultural trauma he had endured during the 1970s, and the liberal, rebellious and critical ideologies which he embraced as a progressive intellectual during the 1980s. Although the subsequent popularity of experimental architecture at home and abroad would be promoted by various forces, including foreign academics, the domestic real estate sector, and the government’s Ministry of Culture, the initial development of experimental architecture almost originated from Wang Mingxian’s own efforts.

Lastly, there is a time lag between the emergence of criticism linked to experimental architecture and the critique to it that led to much scholarly controversy during the early 2000s. After the turn of the century, with the development of the market economy, the visually-appealing design style of the experimental architects were easily captured and marketed by real estate developers. The former marginal architects quickly became part of the elite culture of the urban

53 François Jullien, *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*, (trans. Sophie Hawkes, New York: Zone Books, 2000).

54 Stanislaus Fung, “Orientation: Notes on Architectural Criticism and Contemporary China”, *Journal of Architectural Education* 62, no. 3 (2009): 16-96.

upper-middle class. In the process of becoming mostly composed by recognized practitioners, their community has expanded thanks to the instigation by mass and professional media, while the image held since the 1980s and 1990s as a critical actor has in fact changed and dissolved. As architectural critic Andong Lu has observed, more practical projects have led experimental architects to focus more on the modus operandi of construction than on the expression of a liberal and artistic attitude.⁵⁵ The recognition by the media and the real estate world of the experimental aesthetic is not a triumph of critical values, but the capitalization of novel aesthetics and stylized formal operations. As Theodor Adorno once noted, criticism is time-bounded⁵⁶. The fading conflict between the independent architects and the mainstream socio-economic forces has weakened and transformed their critical positions. However, due to the limited development of any critical discourse in Chinese academia during the 1990s, criticism fostered by experimental architecture acquired center stage in the debates about contemporary architecture in China only through literature circulated abroad and after the gradual withering of the so-called “experimental criticism” during the early 2000s.

Continuing Criticism with Diversified Paradigms

In China in the past decade, as discourses around contemporary architecture gradually stabilized at home and abroad, architectural criticism diversified into several trends. Reflections over criticism have more scholars are proposing new perspectives on the criticality of experimental architects and their successors and contributing to the diversification of global critical discourse. As Baird argues, while the post-critical, “cool” architecture distances itself from the radical, “hot” architecture, it is not necessarily incompatible with the idea of resistance. Architecture without criticality is easily conceptually and ethically adrift, becoming value-free, formalistic manifestations serving the capitalist market. Eisenman also argues that the criticality based on capitalist production has almost come to an end in the ‘60s, replaced by an escalation of geopolitical tension, in which the relatively backdropped Asian countries were subjected to more pressure in cross-cultural communication, and thus are more likely to develop a different critical architecture from that of the West. These calls from the Western scholars hint at the possibility of new critical paradigms in the increasing inter-connection of global architectural culture. In China’s case, many scholars have moved beyond the framework of the American-imported “critical/post-critical” discourse, mobilizing various theoretical paradigms in the theorization of the contemporary local conditions of China. The “expedient

55 Lu, “Responsive Experimentalism”: 42.

56 Theodor Adorno, Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, eds., trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Aesthetic Theory* (London - New York: Continuum, 2004).

architecture" (*quán yí jiàn zhù*) proposed by Li Xiangning,⁵⁷ the "intermediate criticality" advanced by Ding Guanghui,⁵⁸ as well as the "civil architecture" (*gōng mín jiàn zhù*) suggested by Zhu Tao⁵⁹ all indicate the rising awareness of integrating Chinese thinking traditions and practice patterns into the wider real of architectural criticism. Yet compared to the experimental-critical views promoted by Wang Mingxian and Rao Xiaojun, the subjects of both descriptions are no longer the marginalized and conceptual experimentations of the 1990s, but the more diversified, practical and "weakened" positions that, since the 2000s, have sought a compromise with the design market. Compared to the approaches to criticism adopted earlier, the above-mentioned scholars' works have proposed new and time-sensitive critical paradigms that keep pace with the emerging developments in contemporary Chinese architecture.

57 Li argues that the "critical/post-critical" perspective is not applicable to China, summarizing the independent Chinese architectural practices as an "expedient architecture, a clever strategy to strike a subtle balance between the ultimate ideals of architecture and the reality." As Li puts, "it is rather an appropriate assessment of one's strengths and limits. It is not reckless pursuit of glories, but a roundabout way to achieve realistic results. It doesn't blindly pursue high-tech glamour, but focuses on 'low-tech' based on One's available means." See: Xiangning Li, "Make-the-Most-of-It' Architecture: Young Architects and China Tactics", *Sixty Years of Chinese Architecture* (2009): 285-295.

58 Inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's analysis of bodily perception and Karl Marx's notion of struggle/emanipation, Ding argues that "critical architecture" in China draws on the progressive forces of society to challenge the discipline and the status quo within the framework of established rules. It is a position "alternating between commercial production and critical exploration," which explains why it was harmoniously accepted in the Chinese political and cultural system. See: Ding, *Constructing a Place*.

59 Moving away from the alleged politicized critical stance of experimental architects and their successors, "civil architecture" characterizes the socially-committed, critical architecture that engages in advancing a civil society, breaking through the obsession with cultural symbols and visual expressions. See: Jun-Yang Wang and Liu He, "Toward a Civil Architecture: Memorandum of a Critical Agenda in Contemporary Chinese Architecture", *Global Perspectives on Critical Architecture: Praxis Reloaded* (2015): 183-210.

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