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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# *Xianfeng? Houfeng? Youfeng?*—An analysis of selected contemporary Chinese architects, Yung Ho Chang, Liu Jiakun, and Wang Shu (1990s-2000s)



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## Abstract

The three contemporary Chinese architects, namely Yung Ho Chang, Liu Jiakun, and Wang Shu, have often been labeled as the 'avant-garde' or *xianfeng* architects in China. In response to the *xianfeng* architect label, Wang claims that he is a *houfeng* (rear-guard) architect because of his obsession with traditions. This paper aims to discuss the appropriateness of labeling these architects as 'avant-garde,' *xianfeng*, or *houfeng*. Through the theoretical analysis of western discourse, notable attributes of the western architectural avant-garde are identified, and a tentative framework is developed to test its validity and usefulness in a non-western context. The term *youfeng* is arguably a better phrase to describe these three Chinese architects considering the heterogeneous trajectory of modernity in China.

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## 1. Introduction

Three contemporary Chinese architects, namely Yung Ho Chang, Liu Jiakun, and Wang Shu, have often been labeled as the 'avant-garde' or *xianfeng* architects in China. In parallel with 'The Experimental Work of Young Chinese Architects' exhibition in 1999, a special issue of the periodical, *Avant-Garde Today* was published; the special issue

focused on the works of the architects involved in the exhibition. *Xianfeng* has been regarded as a collective feature of a group of independent Chinese architects (Lu, 2003) and has been directly applied to describe individual architects, including Chang (Li, 2008: 43), Liu (Fang et al., 2006: 77), and Wang (Zhu and Yang, 2001: 51). Besides in Chinese publications, the phrase 'avant-garde' has been used to describe these architects in books published overseas (Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, 2006: 40-43; Zhu, 2009: 169). However, in response to the label of being a *xianfeng* architect, Wang claims that he is a *houfeng* (rear-guard) architect because of his obsession with traditions

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(Chau, 2009: 102). His aim is not to strive for a future without ‘root,’ but to revitalize regional traditions.

Regardless of the connotation of the future in the terms ‘avant-garde’ and *xianfeng*, or that of the past in the term *houfeng*, they are all related to time. In fact, the phrase ‘avant-garde’ is regarded by Calinescu as ‘a face of modernity’ because self-consciousness and change are the core values of the idea of modernity (Calinescu, 1987, 1977: 3, 264). Calinescu’s argument implies a Euro-American-centric understanding of a linear, progressive model of modernity. Such an understanding has also been adopted by a number of architectural historians. The most representative example is Banister Fletcher’s ‘The Tree of Architecture,’ which emphasizes the evolution of the dominant western architectural culture in the overall historical development (Fletcher, 1924: iii). A linear view of modernity having a universal significance was also depicted by Sigfried Giedion in his canonical *Space, Time and Architecture* (Giedion, 1967: xxxvi). Similarly, Charles Jencks’s declaration of the death of Modern Architecture, which is signified by the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project in the USA on 16 March 1972, is another example of a singular, teleological model of modernity based on a linear notion of time (Jencks, 1977: 9).

Although the term *houfeng* does not imply a Euro-American-centric, universal development of modernity, this term is still confined to a linear model of understanding. Are the terms ‘avant-garde,’ *xianfeng*, and *houfeng* appropriate to describe these three Chinese architects?

## 2. Avant-garde, Xianfeng, Houfeng, Youfeng

‘Avant-garde’ comes from the French phrase *l’avant-garde*, meaning ‘advance guard’ or ‘vanguard,’ i.e., ‘the foremost part of an army’ (Simpson et al., 1989: 813). The avant-garde is responsible for reconnoitering the unknown terrain ahead and exploring a path for the subsequent army to follow. This military metaphor is now used to describe pioneers or any ‘advance group’ whose work can be characterized chiefly by unorthodox and experimental methods.

The Chinese translation of the phrase ‘avant-garde’ can be *xianfeng* or *qianwei* (前衛). Both *xian* (先) and *qian* (前) convey the meaning of ‘advance,’ whereas *feng* (鋒) and *wei* (衛) denote ‘guard.’<sup>1</sup> The term *xianfeng* can be traced back to 285 CE and conveys a military meaning, whereas the term *qianwei* was considered new in China in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> The word *feng* has multiple meanings, ranging from ‘sharp, acute’ and ‘cutting edge’ to ‘influential.’<sup>3</sup> Therefore, *xianfeng* is a better term to use in this paper than *qianwei*.

The word *Hou* (後) means ‘rear’ or ‘back,’ so *houfeng* signifies ‘rear-guard.’ Similar to the relationship between

the phases ‘avant-garde’ and ‘rear-garde,’ *xianfeng* and *houfeng* are a pair of antonyms that convey a linear model of understanding.

Unlike *xianfeng* or *houfeng*, *youfeng* is not related to time. Because *you* (有) means ‘possession,’ the newly created phrase *youfeng* denotes the possession of *feng*, being ‘sharp, acute, cutting edge, and influential.’

In this paper, we aimed to identify notable attributes of the western architectural avant-garde through the theoretical analysis of western discourse and to develop a tentative framework for testing its validity and usefulness in a non-western context. On the one hand, the three selected Chinese architects will be analyzed via a two-way test based on the tentative, yet partially modified framework. On the other hand, analysis of the western architectural avant-garde discourse will be re-examined by using the case of the three Chinese architects. The appropriateness of labeling the selected Chinese architects as ‘avant-garde’ will be reviewed, and the use of an alternative term for them, such as *xianfeng*, *houfeng*, or *youfeng*, will also be discussed.

## 3. Analysis of western avant-garde theory

The initial effort of theorizing the avant-garde is the article “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939) written by Clement Greenberg. According to Greenberg, the avant-garde should have the courage to maintain a critical position against the prevailing standards of society to carry out experimentation, and to explore a path to keep ‘culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence.’ In opposition to the proliferation of popular, commercial art leading to the production of ‘kitsch’ for consumption, he criticizes kitsch as a deceptive commodity that promotes superficial stylistic fashion and provides ‘faked sensations.’ Facing the threat of kitsch production, he considers that the avant-garde as a minority group should maintain the high level of art by retiring from public altogether to the level of ‘art for art’s sake’ (*l’art pour l’art*) (Greenberg, 1961: 5-6). Similar to Greenberg’s advocacy of the retreat of the avant-garde from the public and the majority, Renato Poggioli considers the avant-garde as a minority culture in ‘combating and denying the majority culture.’ By defining the avant-garde as ‘antagonism,’ he highlights the opposition to the general public and old generations (Poggioli, 1968: 25, 36, 108). According to Matei Calinescu, the notion of the avant-garde is associated with self-consciousness and the ‘restless desire for change,’ which are also characteristics of modernity (Calinescu, 1977: 3).

Compared with the dichotomy between the authenticity of the avant-garde and fake kitsch in Greenberg, antagonism toward the public and the past in Poggioli, and the understanding of the avant-garde as a face of modernity in Calinescu, Peter Bürger takes a historical approach to review the development of avant-garde movements in the early 20th century. By referring to estheticism in the late 19th century, he comments that the bourgeois art at that time was detached from the praxis of life, aiming for art for art’s sake. In response to such deficiencies, he identifies the intentions of the avant-garde in the early 20th century as follows: reintegrating art into the praxis of life, bringing about a radical break with the past traditions, and

<sup>1</sup>One of the meanings of *feng* (鋒) is “the foremost part of an army”. 「布常為軍鋒。」《史記·黥布列傳》. *Hanyu Dazidian* (Chinese Dictionary), 1989. Book 6. Hubei Cishu Publisher; Hubei, 4210.

<sup>2</sup>The term *qianwei* was collected in the *Dictionary for New Terms* published in the 1930s. *Xin Shuyu Cidian* (Dictionary for New Terms), 1932, 6th ed., Shanghai Nanqiang Bookshop; Shanghai, 71.

<sup>3</sup>Multiple meanings of ‘Feng’ include: ‘sharp, acute’ 「高柯危且竦，鋒石棋復仄。」《行京口至竹里》；‘cutting edge’ 「刀、其末曰鋒。」《集韻·鍾韻》；and ‘influential’ 「其鋒不可當。」《史記·淮陰侯列傳》. *Chinese Dictionary* Book 6, 4210.

reiterating the social significance of art (Bürger, 1984: 22-23). However, Bürger takes a pessimistic view of the continuity of the avant-garde. After the failed attempt of the avant-garde in the early 20th century (the so-called historical avant-garde), he labels the subsequent development as the neo-avant-garde in a derogatory sense. He criticizes the neo-avant-gardiste art as a negation of 'genuinely avant-gardist intentions.' Even though the neo-avant-garde may 'proclaim the same goals' as their predecessors, the original intention of reintegration of art into the praxis of life would 'no longer be seriously made' (Bürger, 1984: 58).

Andreas Huyssen concurs with Bürger in considering the attempt of the historical avant-garde to transform '*l'art pour l'art* isolation from reality' and reintegrating art into life praxis. Instead of pursuing a high level of art (as advocated by Greenberg) and harboring antagonism toward the public (as argued by Poggioli), the dichotomy of 'high vs. low, elite vs. popular' neither promotes nor construes the avant-garde as 'an elite enterprise.' Instead, Huyssen uncovers the hidden dialectic of avant-garde and mass culture as suggested by the title of his book *After the Great Divide* (1986) (Huyssen, 1986: 4, 7-8). In contrast to the pessimistic views of Bürger, Huyssen positively believes that by facing the challenge of instrumental reason, technological expansion, and profit maximization of capitalist culture, it is still possible 'to retain the avant-garde's attempt' to emphasize the role of esthetic experience in the transformation of everyday life and to take up the historical avant-garde's insistence to develop strategies for cultural and political contexts nowadays (Huyssen, 1986: 11-15).

Competing views of the avant-garde exist; those of between Greenberg, Poggioli, and Calinescu are on one hand, and Bürger and Huyssen are on the other hand. Greenberg, Poggioli, and Calinescu follow the literal meaning of the phrase 'avant-garde' by considering it as the leading edge of the mainstream, being ahead of their counterparts in a progressive movement, opposing kitsch (Greenberg), majority and old practices (Poggioli), and the esthetics of permanence (Calinescu). However, both Bürger and Huyssen take a historical approach in the review of the development of western art history and point out that the aims of the avant-garde in the early 20th century were the reintegration of art into life praxis and the return of art to its effective place in society.

#### 4. Analysis of western architectural avant-garde theory

What is the relevance of avant-garde theory to the architectural avant-garde? Poggioli's comparison between the avant-garde and the masses has attracted criticism because of its insufficient explanation of the (Akcan, 2002:137) architectural avant-garde of the early 20th century (Esra, 2002: 137). On the contrary, the theoretical contributions of both Bürger and Huyssen are regarded by Charles Jencks as 'persuasive' (Jencks, 1992: 218). Hilde Heynen even considers their contributions to be 'productive in the realm of architectural history' (Heynen, 1999a: 130). The explanatory power of the avant-garde theories of Bürger and Huyssen and its relevance to the discourse on the architectural avant-garde will be examined. Explanations of such theories are based on the analysis of the relevant writings of three

influential scholars (Manfredo Tafuri, Hilde Heynen, and Michael Hays) on the discourse of architectural avant-garde.

##### 4.1. Manfredo Tafuri

Manfredo Tafuri is regarded as 'the most important architectural historian' because he delineated the distinction between the avant-garde and the Modern Movement (Heynen, 2004: 99). He stated that 'not all modern architecture has had its roots in the avant-garde movements.' (Tafuri and Dal Co, 1986: 91). In modern architectural history, he considers Futurism (1909-1914) in Italy, Expressionism (1914-1921) in Germany, De Stijl (1917-1931) in the Netherlands, Russian Constructivism (1919-1932) in the Soviet Union, and the Bauhaus (1919-1933) in Germany as the architectural avant-garde. The reasons for classifying them as the architectural avant-garde are as follows: their experimentation, their break with the past, their social agenda, and their attempt to strive for 'something necessary and universal' (Tafuri, 1998a: 18, 147).

After the failure of the Modern Movement in the early 20th century, Tafuri has pessimistic views that are similar to those of Bürger regarding the continuity of the avant-garde. He acknowledges the 'perpetual gap between utopia and real life' and uses the phrase 'neo-avant-garde' to describe the activities of post-war architects (Tafuri and Dal Co, 1986: 188; Tafuri, 1972: 388, 394). The neo-avant-garde is also labeled by Tafuri as the 'disenchanted avant-garde' because of the retreat into 'the comfort of its charming boudoirs.' He criticizes the post-war modern architecture of reducing to degree zero every dream of social function with 'enigmatic fragments,' in which the purist approach is merely a 'desperate action whose only justification lies in itself' (Tafuri, 1998b: 148, 167).

Tafuri advocates that architects in the capitalist metropolis need to perform a social role to address civil needs, instead of immersing themselves in commercial production or embracing profit maximization. However, he also fully understands that under the totalizing power of capitalism, any resistance or critique will inevitably be compromised and be absorbed into consumer society. There is neither 'salvation' nor 'exit' to rupture capitalism's stranglehold (Tafuri, 1976: 181; Ghirardo, 2002: 39).

##### 4.2. Hilde Heynen

Hilde Heynen identifies the destruction of the old and construction of the new as 'the avant-garde logic.' Similar to Calinescu, Heynen acknowledges that 'the avant-garde radicalizes the basic principle of modernity,' with the aim of breaking with the past to allow future development (Heynen, 1999b: 129-131; 2004:97). Like Tafuri, Heynen delineates a distinction between the Modern movement and the architectural avant-garde, in which the avant-garde was aiming for 'a total unification between art and life.' (Heynen, 1999a: 129).

Heynen stresses the social role of the architectural avant-garde. She clearly supports the views of Bürger and Huyssen that the historical avant-garde was concerned with 'overthrowing the separation between art and the everyday,' exerting an impact on the social system (Heynen, 2007: 50-51). However, when modern architecture was introduced by Hitchcock and Johnson to the US in terms of the 'International Style' in 1932, the approach deviated from

the social agenda of the architectural avant-garde in the past. Heynen criticizes Hitchcock and Johnson for taking a 'clear anti-avant-garde stance' of ignoring all social issues and narrowing the notion of architecture (Heynen, 1999a, 142). To Heynen, architectural development after the Second World War has not shared much in common with the idea of the avant-garde. Instead, postwar modernist architecture has been dominated by functionalism and a rational approach aiming for speedy and efficient production (Heynen, 1999b, 149-150). Despite the failure of the architectural avant-garde in the early 20th century, she highly appreciates utopian thinking in architecture as it embodies the courage and desire to imagine an alternative and better world (Heynen, 2007, 54-55).

### 4.3. Michael Hays

In parallel with Heynen's concern with everyday life, Michael Hays refers to Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and defines the aim of the avant-garde in the early 20th century as an attack on the 'highness' of high art and its detachment from everyday life for reintegration with social practice. To Hays, self-referential architectural practice in favor of strict formal analysis comes from the 'ideology of high art' (Hays, 1988: 154-155). In the article "The Oppositions of Autonomy and History", he further criticizes the exclusion of socio-cultural and political issues in architectural design (Hays, 1998: ix). Similar to Tafuri and Heynen, Hays emphasizes the social agenda of the architectural avant-garde, which is no longer pursued under pure formal operations. Besides social agenda, Hays identifies self-consciousness and utopian ideal as salient features of the architectural avant-garde in the early 20th century. Both of these features are closely related to social agenda because self-consciousness is defined by him as 'an awareness of architecture's position in society and history itself'; whereas the utopian ideal involves an alternative to existing conditions, projecting imaginative plans for the future which are 'impossible desires' (Hays, 2006: xii; 2010: 2).

In the book, *Architecture's Desire: Reading the Late Avant-Garde*, Hays classifies Peter Eisenman, Aldo Rossi, John Hejduk, and Bernard Tschumi, as 'the late avant-garde.' In explaining the phrase, 'the late avant-garde,' Hays considers Bürger's derogatory phrase, 'neo-avant-garde' as a suitable description. The neo-avant-garde negates the intention of the historical avant-garde to return art to life praxis, as commented by Bürger. Likewise, Hays criticizes the postwar architectural development of narrowing itself into pure formal techniques without having any social vision or prefiguring 'a new and better world' (Hays, 2010: 4-5). Despite the lack of social vision of the late-avant-garde compared with their early 20th century predecessors, Hays appreciates their strategies of resistance against the fully commercialized postmodernism, consumerism, and commodification in the overwhelming presence of late capitalism.

### 4.4. Notable attributes of the western architectural avant-garde

Based on the above discussion, some notable attributes of the western architectural avant-garde can be identified based on the theoretical analysis of western discourse.

First, as pointed-out by Tafuri and Greenberg, experimentation is a salient feature of the architectural avant-garde and involves challenging prevailing standards and mainstream conventions.

Moreover, universalism is the ultimate aim of the architectural avant-garde, such as De Stijl and Russian Constructivism in the 1920s; universalism means striving for something necessary and universal (as summarized by Tafuri).

The break with tradition is a common characteristic of the architectural avant-garde, thereby involving the cult of novelty, as commented by Poggioli. The bluntest rejection of traditional practices was mentioned by Calinescu. Tafuri even considers the break with the past as the fundamental condition for the architectural avant-garde. However, Heynen perceives the destruction of the old and construction of the new as the avant-garde logic.

Social response is another dimension of the architectural avant-garde. Both Bürger and Huyssen share the same view that the avant-garde in the early 20th century intended to reintegrate art into life praxis. Both Tafuri and Heynen emphasize the social role of the architectural avant-garde.

Self-consciousness, as identified by Calinescu and Hays, is also a key quality of the architectural avant-garde. Personal reflective thinking can be expressed through projects, works, publications, and other means of disseminating ideas.

The framework of these five notable attributes of the western architectural avant-garde will then be brought into the Chinese context of the three selected architects for a two-way test. By using the framework as a base to be tentatively adopted and modified, this paper examines the three Chinese architects to modify the framework in search of one which can be better suited for the Chinese context.

## 5. Issue of experimentation

Among these three architects, Chang demonstrates an intense interest in conceptual experimentation, especially in his early works, which have been collected in his monograph, *Feichang Jianzhu* (Chang, 1997). Major themes of his conceptual narratives include the use of everyday objects, seeing and framing, and the subversion of norms. Inspired by Duchamp's use of ready-made objects and Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), he added bicycle wheels for bookshelves in the Book-Bike Store, Beijing (1996), and carried out a series of visual experiments, such as the Head House installation (1990), and the Luoyang Kindergarten project (1992). His provocative partitioning arrangement of the Upside-Down Office, Beijing (1997) and the inspiring installation of 'Sliding Folding Swing Door' (1998) exemplify the way he challenges conventional norms.

Both Chang and Wang share a similarity in scale conversation in their conceptual experimentations. Chang's Head House installation (1990) is a subversion of the notion of a house because it merely provides a habitable space for the head of a visitor (Figure 1), while Wang's 'Eight Uninhabitable Houses' are in fact tailored-made light fittings, exploring the possibility of having a family of 'architectural objects' scattered around his own residence (Wang, 2002: 52-64) (Figure 2). Both cases involve the strategy of naming, which highlights the theme to be explored conceptually.

Wang's subsequent installations illustrate his use of limited resources for conceptual experimentation. His 'Decay of a

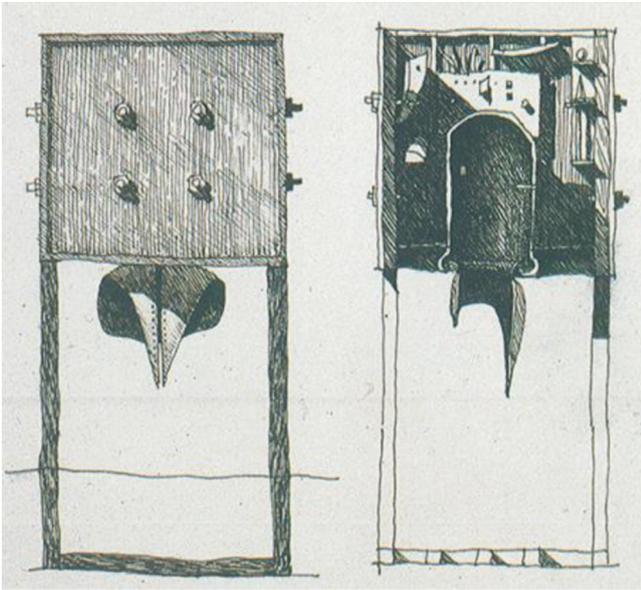


Figure 1 Head House, Beijing (1990) by Chang.

Dome' in Venice Biennale (2010) and his 'Squarely Sphering' in Taipei (2011) were mainly constructed using timber members and window hooks, which were easily erected and dismantled. Likewise, Liu's 'Follow the Wind' (2002) was established by using cheap local materials, i.e., balloons, agricultural membranes, and Chinese fans, for easy sheltering (Figure 3) (Liu, 2002: 140-145).

Besides conceptual experimentation, these architects are interested in material experimentation. Chang has explored the application of new materials in his works, such as the use of plastics and fiber glass for the Shanghai Corporate Pavilion (2010) and the Fiber Glass House, Nanjing (under construction). Conventional materials have been used in alternative ways, such as Chang's use of grasscrete pavers for his lattice screen installation at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (2008) (Figure 4) and Liu's exposure of the holes of perforated concrete blocks on the external facade of the Design Department, Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, Chongqing (2006) (Figure 5). Both Liu and Wang collaborated with their artistic counterparts during the construction process. Liu invited fine arts students to be involved in the production of aluminum etching panels of the Sculpture Department of the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, whereas Wang worked with a pottery teacher to use ceramic pieces on the facades of the Ceramic House, Jinhua (2006) (Figure 6).

Experimentation is a salient feature of the architectural avant-garde, as highlighted by both Tafuri and Greenberg. The three Chinese architects have demonstrated their efforts to explore alternative design solutions and their courage to challenge conventional norms by participating in conceptual and material explorations in various degrees.

## 6. Issue of universalism/localism

Chang, Liu, and Wang express their responses to the physical context and the use of local materials and craftsmanship

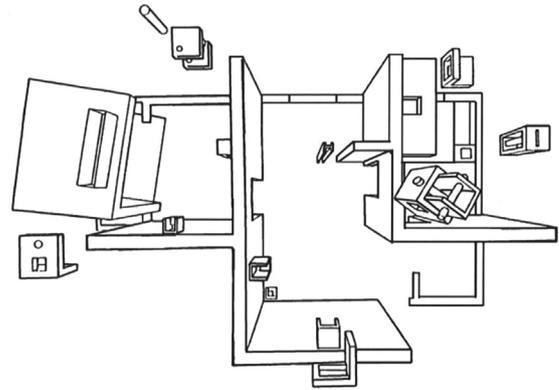


Figure 2 Eight Uninhabitable Houses, Hangzhou (1997) by Wang.



Figure 3 Follow the Wind, Chengdu (2002) by Liu.

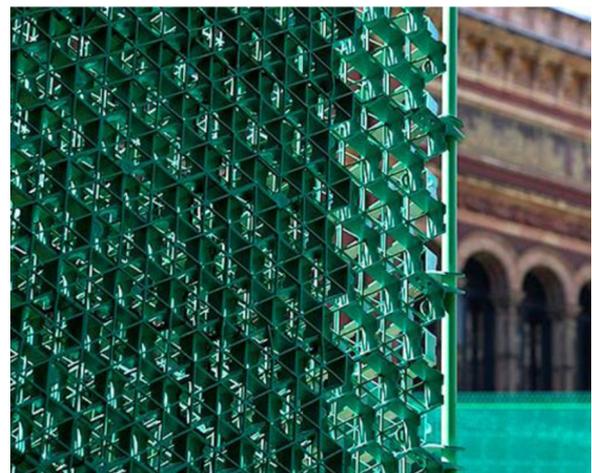
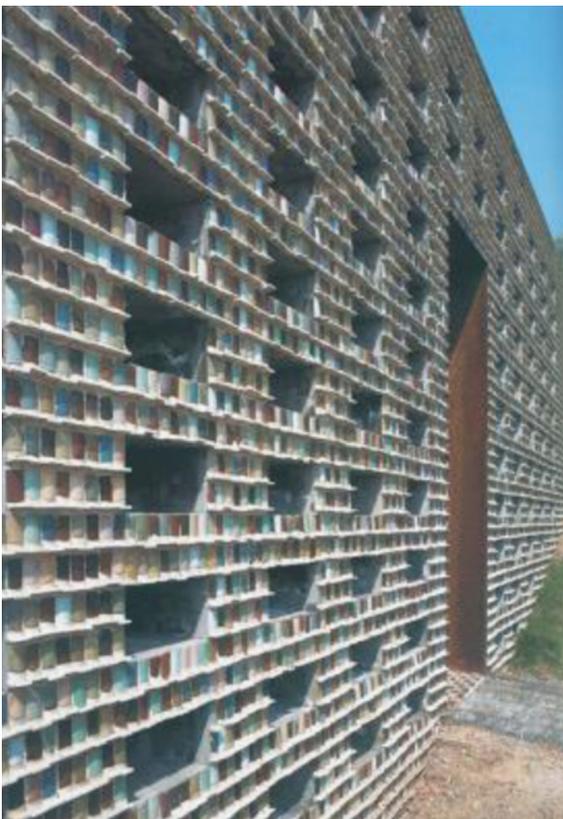


Figure 4 Installation at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (2008), by Chang.



**Figure 5** The Design Department, Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, Chongqing, by Liu (2006).

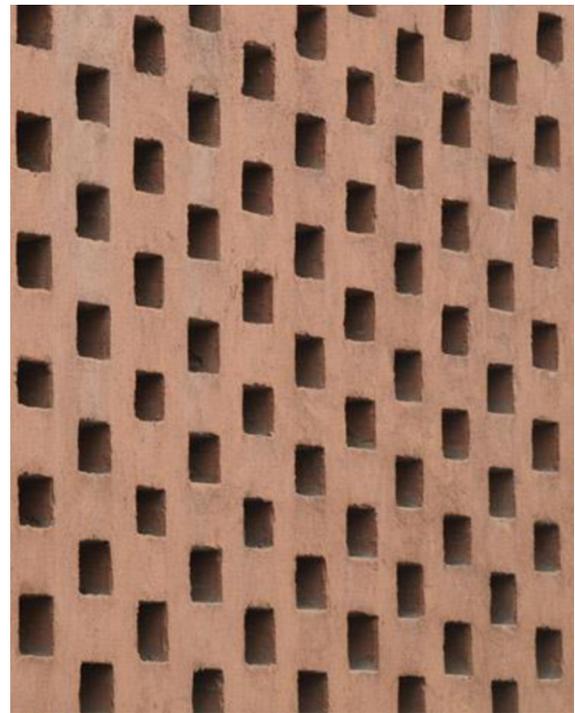


**Figure 6** Ceramic House, Jinhua (2006) by Wang.

through their works rather than aiming for universal design solutions. In terms of physical context, Chang's early work, the Mountain Dialogue Space, Beijing (1998) has stepped masonry walls and a sloping roof to address the topography of the site. By the same token, for the new campus of the

Design Department, the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, Chongqing (2006), designed by Liu, the teaching buildings are located on different levels in a cascading manner to cope with the sloping conditions.

All three architects have produced some climate-responsive designs, but their approaches are different. Liu provides double storey openings and lattice blockworks in the Sculpture Department of the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, Chongqing (2004), to facilitate natural ventilation, which is needed to alleviate the hot weather in Chongqing (Figure 7). Both Wang and Chang are conscious in terms of controlling solar penetration into interior spaces by using old and new building materials, respectively. In the Xiangshan Campus Phase I, Hangzhou (2004), projecting sun-shading screens with old roof tiles on top are provided on the facades of teaching buildings, as designed by Wang (Figure 8). By contrast, in the Shenzhen



**Figure 7** Sculpture Department, Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, Chongqing (2004) by Liu.



**Figure 8** Xiangshan Campus Phase I, Hangzhou (2004) by Wang.

Television (SZTV) Tower (under construction; designed by Chang), sun penetration would be moderated by the crystalline glazed facade, which would collect solar energy through the building-integrated photovoltaics on the facade (Figure 9).

In response to rural contexts, the three architects have different emphases in their designs. The Dalinor Tourist Orientation Centre, Inner Mongolia (2004), which was designed by Chang (2004), has a sunken exhibition space covered with a green roof to match the pastoral scene in the vicinity. Visitors reach the Liu's Luyeyuan Stone Sculpture Museum, Chengdu (2002) by walking through a meandering path in the natural surroundings. Both Chang and Liu aim to reduce the visual impact of their architectural works. In the Xiangshan Campus, Hangzhou (2004, 2007), which was designed by Wang, the central hill is fully highlighted by arranging teaching buildings on the periphery of the site, and the original brook around the hill is preserved to protect the natural site conditions.

Besides responding to physical conditions, these architects are interested in the use of local materials and workmanship. Early examples include Liu's use of pebbles from adjacent rivers in the Xiyuan Leisure Camp, Chengdu (1996), as shown in Figure 10, and Wang's use of rammed earth in the West Lake International Sculpture Exhibition, Hangzhou (2000), as shown in Figure 11. Liu's 'low-tech strategy' emphasizes the balance between the availability of regional resources and architectural quality (Liu, 1997), whereas Wang has conducted a series of studies in Cicheng (a small town) to understand vernacular construction methods (Wang et al., 2006). Compared with Liu and Wang, Chang is keen on experimenting with new materials, but he expressed his concern for local materials and craftsmanship through his teachings and in some of his works. Chang's unbuilt project, the Small Museum of Contemporary Art in Quanzhou (1998) was an attempt to refer to folk techniques in re-using materials from demolished buildings in

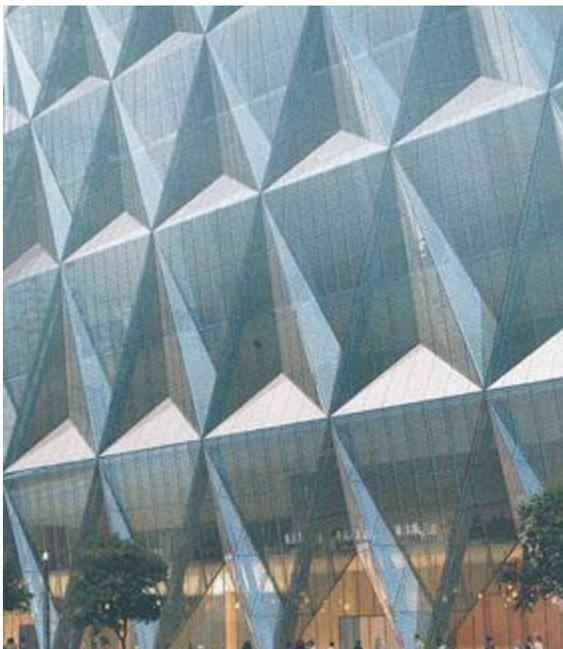


Figure 9 SZTV Tower, Shenzhen (under construction) by Chang.



Figure 10 Xiyuan Leisure Camp, Chengdu (1996) by Liu.

the vicinity to construct walls. The '1K House' design studio (2009) at MIT led by Chang and his colleagues explicitly required students to use locally available resources in constructing affordable housing to keep the budget low (Figure 12).

On the whole, Chang, Liu, and Wang share a common feature, i.e., responding to the physical context in opposition to the western architectural avant-garde; such feature involves striving for something universal, as previously discussed in Section 4.

## 7. Tradition issues

The three Chinese architects make effort to incorporate cultural and formal traditions in their works. For incorporating cultural traditions, a common design strategy of Chang and Wang is the use of Chinese characters. In the Zhengzhou Kindergarten project (1993) and the Humen Hotel project by Chang (1996), building plans were derived from the transformation of Chinese characters (Figure 13). Although the transformation process may involve arbitrary deformation and elimination, it illustrates Chang's attempt to incorporate traditional resources into his architectural design. Comparatively, the Sanhe House, Nanjing (2003-2012), by Wang does not involve any significant deformation or elimination of Chinese characters because the U-shaped configuration of the house is similar to the simplified version of the Chinese character, *xian* (闲) and '木' signifies the tree in the central courtyard (Figure 14).

In terms of formal traditions, vernacular architecture is a source of design inspiration among these architects. Instead of imitating traditional building forms or applying big pitched roofs on top of buildings, Wang developed curvilinear roofs that deviate from the cubic canonical form of modern architecture; such structures manifest his critical interpretation of Chinese tradition. He first designed the curvilinear roof for the Sanhe House in 2003 (Figure 15) and gradually increased the scale in the Five Scattered Houses (2006) and the Xiangshan Campus



Figure 11 Earth Tamping for the West Lake Exhibition, Hangzhou (2000) by Wang.



Figure 12 1K House, Sichuan (2011) designed in a studio led by Chang.

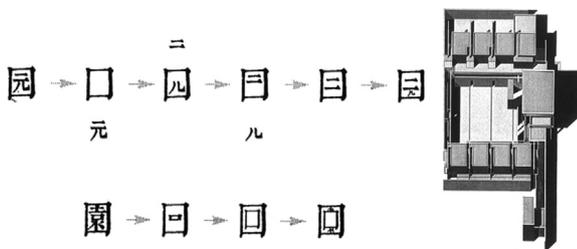


Figure 13 Zhengzhou Kindergarten project (1993) by Chang.

Phase II (2007). In the China International Practical Exhibition of Architecture (CIPEA) in Nanjing, Liu has subdivided the building form into smaller volumes. The buildings are endowed with rich and vivid expressions by staggered pitched roof composition, reminiscent of the impression of clusters of traditional village houses (Figure 16). Similarly, for the residential project, the Bay in Shanghai (2010), Chang has explicitly expressed the silhouette of gable walls to capture one salient feature of Chinese folk houses (Figure 17). The pitched roof profiles and the white and gray tones of walls,

along with the large glazing and steel channels around the gable walls, illustrate his re-interpretation of vernacular architecture.

Contrary to the break with tradition of the western architectural avant-garde and the avant-garde logic of destruction of the old (as stated by Heynen and as discussed in Section 4.2), the three Chinese architects are actively engaging the cultural and formal traditions of China in various degrees.

## 8. Social response issue

Chang, Liu, and Wang have not confined themselves to a narrow concern in terms of architectural forms, but have expressed their social responses through their works. Their social engagement can be summarized in terms of how they address different issues, such as massive demolition and destruction, urban development, and housing design.

With the massive demolition of Chinese vernacular architecture, both Chang and Wang have tried to respond through their works. In the Small Museum of Contemporary Art in Quanzhou (1998), Chang proposed to recycle old stones and bricks for new wall construction, but this project was not realized (Figure 18). A similar way of thinking was further developed by Wang. In a series of works, including the Xiangshan Campus (2004, 2007), the Ningbo History Museum (2008) (Figure 19), and the Ningbo Tengtou Pavilion, Shanghai (2010), Wang expressed his opposition to the extensive demolition of historic fabric and has incorporated discarded tiles and bricks into his new architecture. Liu's social engagement is most manifested after the devastating Sichuan earthquake in 2008. Besides the construction of the Hu Huishan Memorial House, which he funded himself, Liu developed the lightweight brick, known as the Rebirth Brick, to address the vast debris resulting from massive destruction. The low-cost production of the Rebirth Brick in local factories facilitated the regeneration of the disaster zones (Figure 20).

Urban development in China is progressing at an accelerating speed. The connectivity of the existing city fabric is commonly interrupted by the establishment of discrete iconic buildings. In the competition entry for the Central China Television (CCTV) Headquarters, Beijing (2002), Chang collaborated with Toyo Ito to propose a low-rise solution with large-scale courtyards and gardens for the general public (Figure 21). Similar to Chang's idea of providing breathing spaces in the urban context, Liu's Tianfu Software Park Communication Centre, Chengdu (2010), is also a low-rise design with urban significance; publicly accessible roof gardens are provided to serve society in general (Figure 22). Likewise, the Ningbo History Museum (2008) by Wang has a viewing platform to allow visitors to observe the surrounding skyscrapers and building construction in the new development area of Ningbo. The extensive historical fragments on external walls can lead visitors to rethink the developmental approach to urban environment in China (Figure 23).

Housing is a common social issue in contemporary China, particularly due to massive urbanization. Chang's Qingxi Hillside Housing proposal was an attempt to respond to the ineffective use of valuable land resources in China. In contrast to the common phenomenon of extensive villa development, Chang proposed that the residential units of

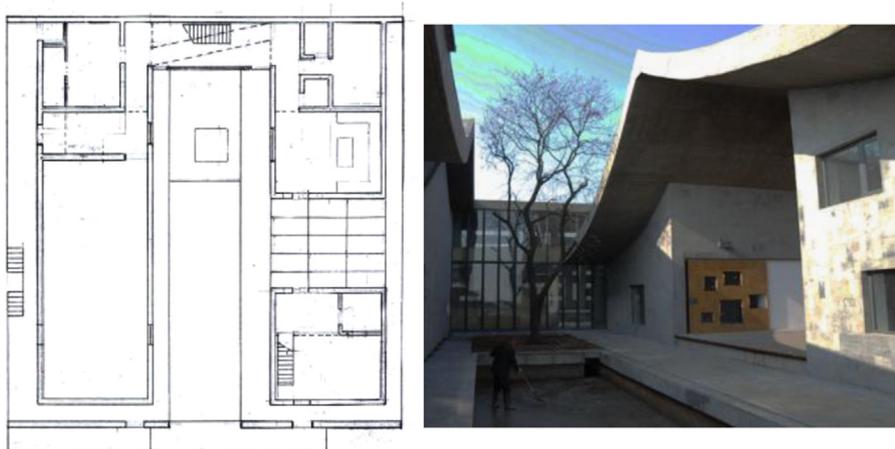


Figure 14 Sanhe House, Nanjing (2003-2012) by Wang.



Figure 15 Sanhe House, Nanjing (2003-2012) by Wang.

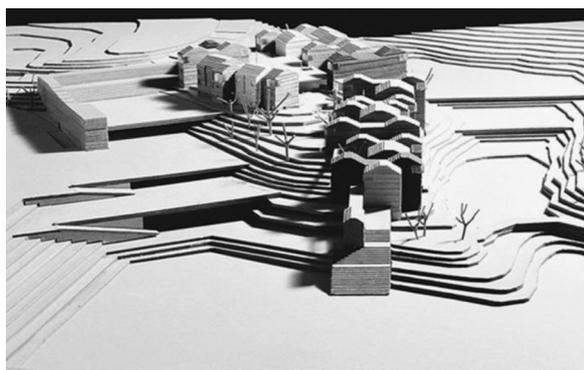


Figure 16 The Reception & Dining Centre, Nanjing (2003-2012) by Liu.

the Qingxi Hillside Housing be attached together to achieve higher density; these units were equipped with introverted courtyards for residents to enjoy outdoor activity spaces. As the Head of the Department of Architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Chang and his colleagues led the '1K House' design studio in 2009, which required students to design affordable houses at a unit cost of barely one thousand US dollars. In 2011, Chang led the '10K House' design studio at MIT to respond to the destructive



Figure 17 The Bay, Shanghai (2010) by Chang.

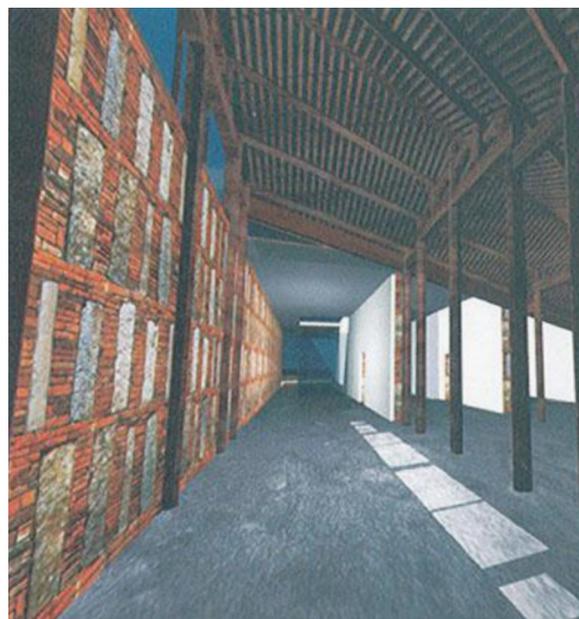


Figure 18 Small Museum of Contemporary Art project, Quanzhou (1998) by Chang.



Figure 19 Ningbo History Museum, Ningbo (2008) by Wang.



Figure 20 Rebirth Bricks (2008) by Liu.

earthquake and tsunami in Japan. These two design studios transcended the narrow concern of architectural formal language and moved toward a practical response to fundamental housing issues in society, thereby cultivating a sense of social responsibility among students.

Liu and Wang are involved in high-rise residential development. In the Time Rose Garden Phase III, Guangzhou (2006), Liu proposed to provide a publicly accessible elevated walkway to explore the possibility of transgressing the conventional boundary between public and private open spaces, yet the idea has not been realized upon completion. Wang is involved in a real estate project, i.e., the Vertical Apartments in Hangzhou (2007). To Wang, this housing experiment is for exploring a solution for high-density living.



Figure 21 CCTV competition entry (2002) by Ito and Chang.



Figure 22 Tianfu Software Park Communication Centre, Chengdu (2010), by Liu.

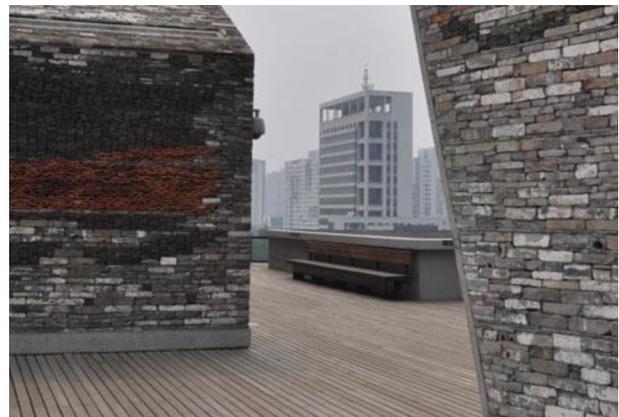


Figure 23 Ningbo History Museum, Ningbo (2008), by Wang.

A communal area is provided on each floor to facilitate social interaction among residents. Although these architects have attempted to address the housing issue in China, their participation in this area is still limited.

## 9. Self-consciousness issues

In addition to architectural design, the three Chinese architects are self-conscious and express their reflective thinking through writing. Chang, Liu, and Wang have been publishing their writings since they were studying at universities. When Chang was an architectural student in the USA in the early 1980s, he was aware of the significant differences between the American liberal teaching pedagogy and the Beaux-Arts-based curriculum in China at that time. He published his articles in the Chinese architectural journal, *New Architecture* to share his learning experience and, subsequently, his teaching approach in the USA to his Chinese counterparts (Chang, 1983, 1988). He emphasized the importance of paying attention to everyday life and being sensitive to one's surroundings (Chang, 1988: 76-78). Similar views have also been raised by Wang in an early article published in the Chinese journal, *Architect* (Wang, 1984). Compared with Chang and Wang, Liu was more interested in novel writing; his first published novel, "Mucking Around" still expressed his reflection on the meaning of life (Liu, 1980).

The publication of monographs can define the critical positions of these architects in contemporary Chinese architecture. Among them, Chang was a pioneer in publishing his first monograph entitled *Feichang Jianzhu*, the title of which shared the same name as that of Chang's atelier (Chang, 1997). This book summarizes the conceptual exploration and self-conscious pursuit of his early practice. Chang is prolific in monograph publication. His subsequent books, *For a Basic Architecture* and *Architectural Verb*, signify the transformation from his early conceptual narratives to tectonic concern, thereby involving construction and materiality (Chang, 2002, 2006). By comparison, Liu and Wang, who are both locally trained architects and did not study abroad, showed their substantial sensitivities to the use of regional resources and local craftsmanship in their books *Now and Here* and *The Beginning of Design*, respectively (Liu, 2002a; Wang, 2002). As reflected by these book titles, Liu accentuates his regional response through his works, whereas Wang argues that learning from artisans away from professional architectural knowledge is the beginning of design.

Besides writing, the three Chinese architects have participated in exhibitions to share their design ideas. Of the three architects, Chang is the most active in participating in and curating exhibitions.<sup>4</sup> Apart from two seminal group exhibitions in contemporary Chinese architecture, namely the 'Experimental Architecture of China' exhibition, Beijing (1999) and the 'TU MU: Young Architects in China' exhibition, Berlin (2001) (Figure 24), all the architects participated in the CIPEA, Nanjing (2003), which was curated by Liu Jiakun and Arata Isozaki. Some of these architects also organized solo exhibitions, such as Wang's 'Architecture as a Resistance' Exhibition, Belgium (2009), which highlighted his oppositional strategy against mainstream practice (Figure 25), and Chang's 'Material-ism' retrospective



Figure 24 TU MU Exhibition, Berlin (2001).

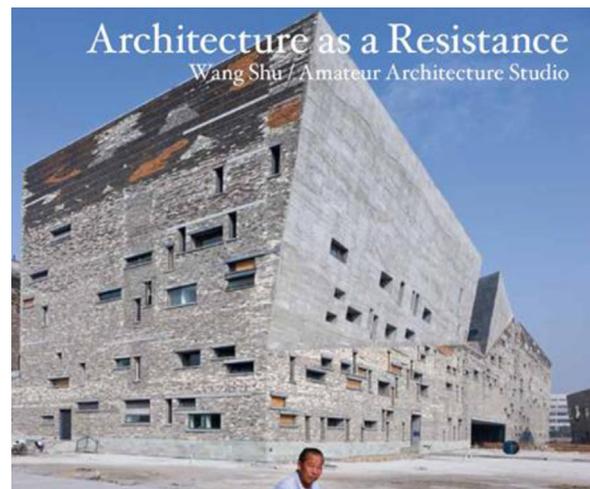


Figure 25 Wang's solo exhibition, Belgium (2009).

exhibition, Beijing (2012), which reiterated his emphasis on the materiality of architecture (Figure 26).

In general, the three Chinese architects have expressed their self-consciousness through their writings and exhibitions. These activities are in accordance with the western definition of architectural avant-garde in terms of self-conscious practice and reflective thinking.

## 10. Conclusions

From the above discussion, Chang, Liu, and Wang share similar characteristics based on five salient features, as follows: experimentation, localism, involvement with traditions, social response, and self-consciousness. The three architects are active in experimentation. Localism of their works is well-developed in terms of responses in the physical context and in the use of local materials and workmanship. They demonstrate various degrees of involvement with cultural and formal

<sup>4</sup>Chang participated as an exhibitor or curator in 56 of 89 (over 60%) exhibitions involving Chinese architects from 1996 to 2009. Qin Lei and Yang Fan, *Zhongguo Dangdai Jianzhu zai Haiwai de Zhanlan* (Overseas exhibitions of Chinese contemporary architecture), *Shidai Jianzhu (Time + Archit.)* 1 (2010): 41-47.



Figure 26 Chang's retrospective exhibition, Beijing (2012).

traditions. Besides, they have delivered some socially responsive designs. Liu's and Wang's responses to massive demolition and destruction are the most notable. Their participation in urban development has also inspired others. Although they have tried to respond to the pressing housing issue in China, their participation so far is still limited. All three architects have expressed their self-consciousness and reflective thinking through various means of dissemination of ideas, such as publication, exhibition, and curatorship, in addition to their architectural works.

Based on the analysis of the western architectural avant-garde theory in the writings of Manfredo Tafuri, Hilde Heynen, and Michael Hays, the tentative framework of notable attributes of the western architectural avant-garde are as follows: experimentation, universalism, breaking with tradition, social agenda, and self-consciousness. The selected Chinese architects have some characteristics that reflect western architectural avant-garde, such as experimentation, social agenda, and self-consciousness. However, some differences in the other two aspects exist. The Chinese architects show localism and involvement with traditions, which are in contrast to universalism and breaking with traditions (general characteristics associated with western architectural avant-garde). By performing a two-way test on the tentative framework and the Chinese case of the three selected Chinese architects, this paper reveals the deficiencies of the Euro-American-centric framework for a non-western context of China. Moreover, this paper contributes to the understanding of the design strategies of the three Chinese architects through architect-based analysis.

Chang, Liu, and Wang have often been regarded as the avant-garde or *xianfeng* architects in China. However, Wang has claimed that he is a rear-garde or a *houfeng* architect. All these terms are confined to a linear model of understanding or to a Euro-American-centric, universal, progressive model of modernity. Thus, these terms are inappropriate for labeling these architects.

Having said that, the word *feng* is appropriate to describe these Chinese architects because it denotes 'sharp, acute, cutting edge, and influential,' as explained in Section 2. As discussed above, Chang, Liu, and Wang are sharp, acute, and cutting edge in terms of their self-conscious pursuit of experimentation and their proactive responses to social needs. These architects are also influential in producing discourse through their writings, competitions, exhibitions, curatorship, lecturing, and various awards. Since *youfeng* signifies the possession of *feng*, it is arguably a better phrase to describe these Chinese architects considering the heterogeneous trajectory of modernity in China.

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