The Boundary of Architectural Experimentation in China:
A Retrospective on Tradition

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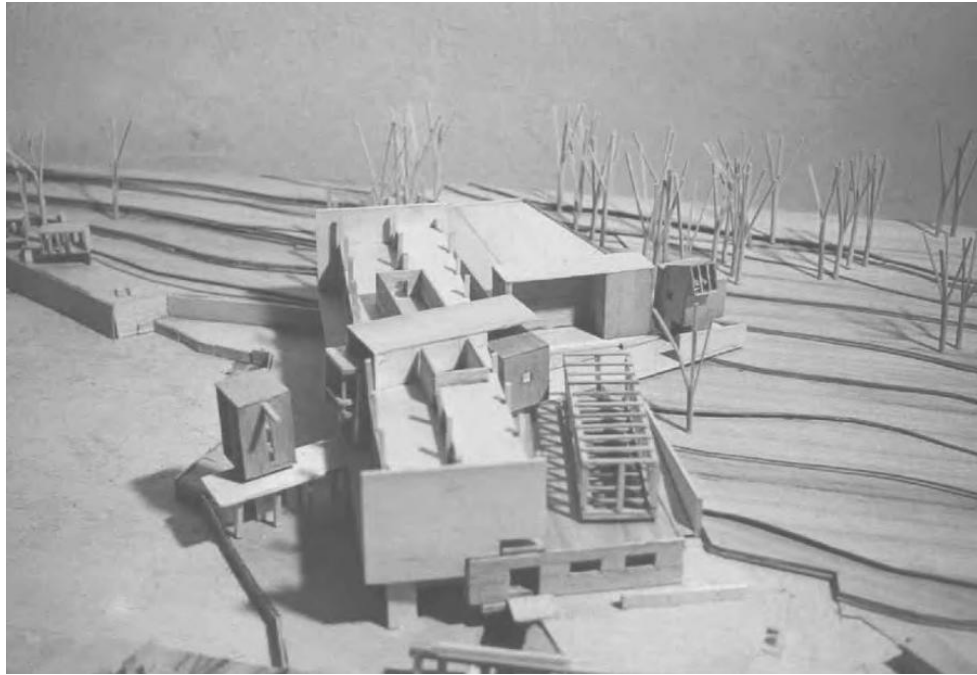AA HCT

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Figure 1. Suzhou University Wenzheng College Library

In China, the concept of "experimental architecture" was first introduced by architectural and art critic Wang Mingxian. He frequently employed this term in discussions with young architects at the time.[2] On 18 May 1996, during a public conference in Guangzhou, the notion was formally brought into public discourse for the first time, eventually culminating in its prominent showcase at *The Exhibition of Young Architects of China* in 1999.[3] This exhibition proposed a new narrative framework, marking a pivotal direction for Chinese contemporary architecture in negotiating modernity and tradition. As Real observes, exhibitions are tools of canon formation[4], and this event functioned as such by institutionalizing the ethos of experimentation. For the architects and critics involved in this exhibition, experimentation signified progress—functioning as an agency intrinsically bonded with the aspirational drive for architectural enlightenment in China.

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[1] Figure 1, Suzhou University Wenzheng College Library (model), by Wang Shu. *Time+Architecture*, no. 2 (2000): 12–15, 8.
[2] See Xu Kaiming, "Contemporary Architectural Pop Culture and Experimental Architecture in China," *Tiangong*, no. 26 (2023), 56-58, 58.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Patricio del Real, "'Weak' Modernism: Managing the Threat of Brazil's Modern Architecture at MoMA," in *Rethinking Global Modernism Architectural Historiography and the Postcolonial*, ed. Vikramaditya Prakash, Maristella Casciato, and Daniel Coslett (Routledge, 2021), 29–46, 29.

Zhang Li characterizes the experimentation of Chinese architects as essentially a process of "breaking through." She observes, "We are confronted with two colossal forces: the assertive incursion of Western modern architectural culture, and the latent entanglement of China's traditional architectural heritage."[5]This implies the irreconcilable tension Chinese architects have been navigating since the Reform and Opening-up.[6]The seeds of experimentation were first sown in the transformation of architectural education. The Beaux-Arts tradition, which had exerted a profound and enduring influence in China as the inaugural model of architectural education[7],was significantly challenged by the introduction of Western postmodernist in certain universities. Educated in reformed institutions like Tongji and Southeast University, these architects sought to develop their own theoretical language. Economic reforms and marketization enabled the emergence of independent architectural practices. Under the influence of real estate development and large-scale land privatization, the Ministry of Construction issued the "Interim Measures for Pilot Private Design Firms" in 1993, first implemented in Shenzhen and Guangzhou as pilot cities before expanding to coastal open cities and provincial capitals nationwide by 1995.[8]Ding Guanghui believes these architects have a strong independent awareness[9], but it also leaves them in a marginal position. This marginality is reflected in the scale, significance, and design methodology of their projects. Compared to the state-owned design institutes[10]that take on the majority of new public buildings, independent practices often work on small-scale private commissions, with many architects starting their careers designing residential projects. Moreover, even when their design strategies are viewed as potentially transformative in a messianic sense, they remain discursively suppressed by the mainstream profession. Therefore, by labeling their practice as "experimental", they were seeking a kind of protection, legitimacy, and survival. As Rao Xiaojun argues, experimentation is "an intelligent theoretical act"—precisely because "it does not intend to create an alternative theory that surpasses previous frameworks to establish a new orthodoxy or mainstream."[11]The earliest architectural experiments in China employed a method of suspension, which avoided direct confrontation between different paradigms in order to preserve their criticality. In order to be granted exemption by the dominant discourse, they negated their own tendency toward ossification.

The repeatability that underpins experimentation in the natural sciences is largely rejected in architectural experiments. The similarity between the two resides only in their shared focus on observation and hypothesis; beyond that point, their trajectories diverge. If experimentation in the natural sciences serves as a means of proof, then architectural experimentation functions more as a mode of advocacy. However, for Chinese architects, the rhetorical foundations upon which such advocacy might rest—its arguments, references, and

[5] Zhang Li, "Group Breakthrough Show: A Reflection on Chinese Contemporary Architecture," *New Architecture*, no. 2 (2006): 87–89, 87.
[6] The policy of opening up the capitalist market proposed by Deng Xiaoping in 1978.
[7] See Xing Ruan, "Accidental Affinities: American Beaux-Arts in Twentieth-Century Chinese Architectural Education and Practice," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 61, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): 30–47, https://doi.org/10.2307/991810.
[8] Ding Guanghui, "'Experimental Architecture' in China," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 73, no. 1 (March 1, 2014): 28–37, 29, https://doi.org/10.1525/jsah.2014.73.1.28.
[9] Ibid.
[10] The State-owned design institute is a specific Chinese architectural system. It originated during the planned economy era and typically encompasses planning, architecture, and engineering consultancy services. These institutes undertake not only architectural projects but also large-scale state-owned infrastructure developments, and they continue to exist today.
[11] Rao Xiaojun, "Experimental Architecture: A Conceptual Exploration," *Time+Architecture*, no. 2 (2000): 12–15, 13.

criteria—often remain unclear. This lack of clarity represents the inherent cost of deploying "experiment" as a mode of resistance within the Chinese context. Architectural experimentation here tends to spiral around endless self-explanation, in search of an elusive exit from dominant paradigms. The non-repeatable nature of these architectural experiments gives rise to interpretive multiplicity, and many young Chinese architects believe that the path forward lies precisely in the emergence of such differences. Yet this approach comes at a price: their theoretical alliances remain fragmented, and their collective presence is sustained only by a loosely held, declarative desire to experiment. Within the ruptured narrative of Chinese modernity, these architects reach out into the darkness, and whenever their fingertips brush against something that feels solid, they declare it a totem of redemption. In this sense, what is often called architectural experimentation in China is less an actual experiment than an experimental consciousness. By contrast, experimental architecture in the coeval West often faces a far more clearly defined object of critique. Eleven years before China's 1999 exhibition, MoMA had already staged the famous *Deconstructivist Architecture exhibition*, which was likewise seen as an experimental endeavor. Mark notes "each project employs formal strategies developed by Russian avant-garde early in the twentieth century."[12]This assessment clarifies both the historical lineage and the theoretical genealogy of Deconstructivist works. Deconstructivist architects had a clear understanding of the structures they sought to question and dismantle, regardless of whether such deconstruction ultimately manifested as formal gestures. Within the trajectory of architectural language, they established a coherent experimental field. On the other hand, the condition of plurality within a postcolonial context demanded that their experiments maintain a certain universality capable of accommodating the transnational and cross-cultural expansion of architecture.

Chinese architects have historically operated from an ethical position markedly distinct from that of their Western counterparts. A representative example can be found in the 1999 exhibition, where Zhao Bing presented a work that directly translated the calligraphic form of the Chinese character "dragon" into an architectural gesture.[13]his was a straightforward, naive, and unreflective act of symbolic appropriation. In terms of appearance, it might loosely resemble the formal vocabulary of Deconstructivism, yet it bypassed all the theoretical reasoning that underpins the logic of deconstructive representation. It was certainly not Deconstructivist in any meaningful sense; in essence, it differed little from the dragon-shaped ornamental sculptures found on the roofs of ancient Chinese buildings a thousand years ago. Nevertheless, the project was received with considerable acclaim. In a written response to the exhibition's curator Wang Mingxian, the director of the Institute of Architectural Art at the Chinese National Academy of Arts praised the work for its "clarity of theme, accessibility, and formal beauty."[14] [15]While it may be inappropriate to assess the architectural explorations of a nation only a decade into its re-engagement with market reform through the lens of Western critical theory or aesthetic standards, this case nonetheless raises a fundamental

[12] Mark Wigley, "Deconstructivist Architecture," in *Deconstructivist Architecture* (New York: MoMA, 1988), 10

[13] Zhao Bing, "My Perspective on Culture and Architecture," in *Avant-Garde Today No.8,* ed. Jiang Yuanlun (Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences Pub., 2000), 21

[14] Wang Mingxian, "Fragments of Spatial History: The Story of an Experimental Architecture Exhibition by Young Chinese Architects," in *Avant-Garde Today No.8,* ed. Jiang Yuanlun (Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences Pub., 2000), 4

[15] On the contrary, this official commented that Wang Shu's written introduction to his own project was "completely incomprehensible." Wang Shu's text reads: "The joy of rich, textured fragments of sentences," "the assumed form of meaning," "an effortless release." Wang Shu's writing style, to some extent, reflects his architectural ideas.

question: to whom does experimental architecture address itself? Perhaps it would be unfair to judge the architectural experimentation of a country that had only recently reopened to a market economy by the standards of Western aesthetic or theoretical systems. However, this example does point to a deeper question: was experimental architecture in China responding to the intellectual enthusiasm of a small elite, or to the aesthetic sensibilities and daily lives of the general public—particularly in the context of a nation that, in 1999, had a population exceeding 1.1 billion, yet fewer than two million people enrolled in higher education.[16]

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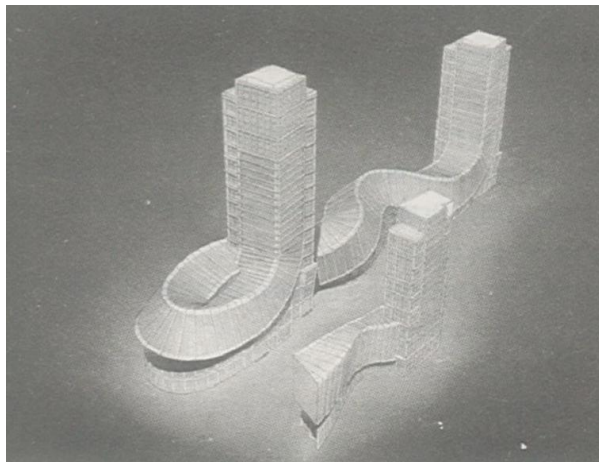
Figure 2. Dragon Form Building

The production of space of experimental architecture can be seen as a form of violence. For the general public at the time, traditional cultural symbols were far more readily accepted than postmodern ones. If there was one thing capable of evoking the strongest sense of collective identity among the Chinese people, it was neither political parties nor ideological systems, but the inherited legacy of tradition that has persisted to the present day. Even though Chinese history witnessed periods of foreign rule and cultural ruptures such as the Cultural Revolution, this legacy was never structurally excluded. This continuity also operates within the previously mentioned context of the ruptured narrative of Chinese modernity. In architectural discourse, even postmodernism does not preclude the possibility of engaging with tradition-based architectural practices. Venturi argued that architects should engage with conventions and render them vivid.[18]We often see how the results of folkloric studies—specific to certain regions and cultures—are interpreted by architects as textual material, forming the basis for particular architectural forms and spatial arrangements. Once a building enters into use, the spatial practices of its occupants turn the architecture itself into a new folkloric text, which can in turn be appropriated by subsequent architectural practices.

However, to understand the issue of violence inherent in architectural experimentation, one must first understand the specific ruptures China was facing at the time. If architectural practice is understood as evolving alongside social transformation, then culture too would follow this linear temporal development, gradually integrating into the architectural process.

[16] Data are from the National Bureau of Statistics of China. *Statistical Communiqué on the 1990 National Economic and Social Development.* Accessed April, 2025. https://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/tjgb/ndtjgb/qgndtjgb/202302/t20230206_1901933.html
[17] Figure 2, Dragon Form Building (model), by Zhao Bing. "My Perspective on Culture and Architecture." In *Avant-Garde Today* no. 8, 21.
[18] Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977), 42.

Yet, when economic and technological development far outpace cultural evolution, convention begins to lose its grounding in everyday life. Just as traditional rural stoves become unusable in modern apartment blocks, architecture seeking new inspiration can only grasp at floating signifiers of culture, severed from their original contexts. Archaeological studies suggest that events cause structural ruptures and create opportunities for rearticulation within new frameworks.[19] In ancient times, such events were often linked to natural disasters or warfare; but in China during the 1990s and earlier, it was the rapid development of productive forces that constituted such a rupture. This event tore open a deep wound in the social surface, creating a cultural void. Historical experience suggests that we might expect, after a period of natural healing, the emergence of newly gestated cultural structures capable of forming a renewed cultural landscape. However, in the context of fast-paced production, Chinese architecture could not afford to wait for culture to organically mature. Yet architects still yearned for cultural elements to supplement their work. As a result, they sutured the wound through a form of violence. The materials used for this suturing were often fragments of language stripped from earlier categories of Chinese tradition or imported Western sources. Wang Mingxian offered an optimistic account, suggesting that "Chinese experimental architecture consciously keeps its distance from fashionable Western trends, attempting instead to re-enter Eastern culture from a new position."[20] But we must also consider Venturi's concern, that to use conventions unconventionally is to alter the very context.[21]

Other architects adopted far more cautious strategies. Chang Yung Ho, another participant in the 1999 exhibition, received his architectural education abroad and later served as the head of the Department of Architecture at MIT (2005–2010). Reflecting on his project for the Quanzhou Contemporary Small Art Museum, he wrote that the use of old bricks, stones, tiles, and timber roof frames to construct a new building led him to confront two quintessentially contemporary issues: first, the problem of the found object or ready-made; and second, the concept of collage.[22] In this project, his design strategy was composed of three major approaches:

1. He first reclaimed a large quantity of building materials from demolished local dwellings, such as bricks, and used them to build new load-bearing walls.
2. He then reassembled four sets of old roof frames of different sizes, arranging them with wooden purlins to create an irregular, folded roof surface that disrupted the symmetrical form of traditional Chinese timber structures.
3. Spatially, he extracted two core spatial typologies from Quanzhou vernacular dwellings—cuo[23] and liao[24]—and layered and repeated these forms in a way he described as collage.[25]

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[19] See Robin A. Beck Jr. et al., "Eventful Archaeology," *Current Anthropology* 48, no. 6 (December 2007): 833–60, https://doi.org/10.1086/520974.
[20] Wang Mingxian and Shi Jian, "'Jiushi Niandai Zhongguo Shiyanxing Jinzhu' (Experimental Architecture in China in the 1990s)," *"Wenyi Yanjiu" (Literature & Art Studies)*, no. 1 (1998): 121.
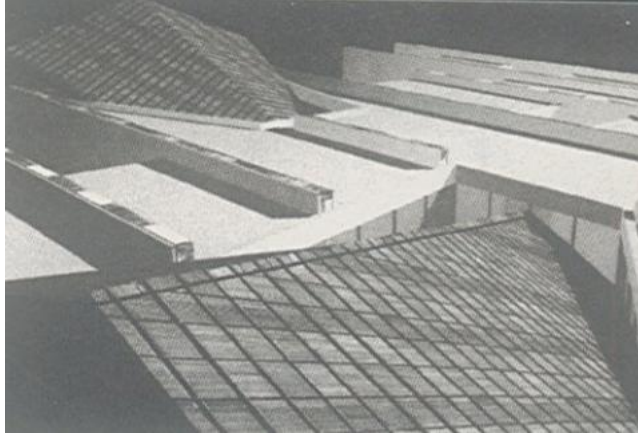[21] Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 43.
[22] Chang Yung Ho, "Tiny City," in *Avant-Garde Today No.8*, 9.
[23] A courtyard-type layout emphasizing centrality and enclosure.
[24] A linear spatial sequence, such as corridors or side wings.
[25] Ibid., 15.

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Figure 3. Quanzhou Contemporary Small Art Museum

At first glance, Chang's strategy appears to negotiate between tradition and contemporaneity. However, from the theoretical perspective of Richard Werbner, this approach ultimately remains at the level of bricolage rather than achieving syncretism. As Werbner explains, syncretism refers to a form of "religious hybridization," whereas bricolage is "the formation of fresh cultural forms from the ready-to-hand debris of old one."[27]Chang's design sidesteps the socio-political contexts embedded in these materials. The reclaimed bricks and timber are not neutral—they are the byproducts of violent demolition and urban cleansing. The act of reuse here can be seen as a form of appropriation that strips the materials of their historical agency. What could have served as material witnesses to traumatic urban transformations instead become formal ornaments, fixed into new walls as aestheticized cultural packaging. Furthermore, the traditional forms he collaged—cuo and liao—carry with them deeply entrenched power structures. These architectural prototypes historically served the needs of the patrilineal clan system in traditional Chinese domestic life. Their spatial configurations encoded strict hierarchies of age and gender. In experimental architecture, however, these forms are stripped of their ethical implications and reimagined as symbols of "tradition." They thus become sources of cultural capital and legitimacy for architectural experimentation, despite their entanglement with authoritarian and patriarchal spatial orders.

To a large extent, Chinese experimental architects are attempting to mend the ruptures caused by modernity through precisely this kind of practice. These architectural experiments have drawn interest from the West, yet the architects who engage in them remain largely confined within China. Figures such as Liu Jiakun and Wang Shu, despite receiving prestigious international recognition like the Pritzker Prize, have had almost no overseas commissions. In this sense, architectural experimentation in China has evolved into a self-enclosed process, which is one of reappropriation and reinterpretation within a particular cultural framework. Through their experiments, these architects aim to reawaken a once-dispersed architectural spirit, a kind of cultural cohesion now lost. But this practice resembles an addictive substance. Architects become trapped within the very logic of experimentation. If an architect employs

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[26] Figure 3, Quanzhou Contemporary Small Art Museum (model), by Chang Yung Ho. "Tiny City." In *Avant-Garde Today* no. 8, 15.

[27] Richard Werbner, "Afterword," in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, ed. Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart (London: Routledge, 1994), 203.

the same strategy in their first experiment and their hundredth—repeating it throughout their entire career—can it still be called experimentation? Does this not betray the very ethos of the experimental? As previously discussed, Chinese architectural experimentation was initially conceived as a temporary, transitional mode of practice. It was characterized by its marginality, from which architects could derive richer and more critical perspectives. However, once they realized that this marginal position could itself become a discursive stronghold, they ceased to respond to the original desire for reform. In *Post-modern Mixed Architecture*, Yin Guojun criticized Chinese experimental architecture on five counts: a lack of originality and an excess of imitation; an emphasis on "margins" over "ontology"; a neglect of architecture's fundamental goals; a disconnect between theory and practice; and an absence of engagement with new technologies.[28]Chinese architects have ceased to pursue the creation of architectural ontology itself. Instead, they have preserved the temporality of experimentation as a surrogate for ontology.

Such a phenomenon can be traced in the career of Liu Jiakun. In his early years, Liu described his architectural approach as one of "resistance." The relationship between resistance architecture and revivalism is ambiguous, as it constantly recalls earlier construction logics and materials. Whether such acts of recall amount to resistance or revival depends on the degree to which the recalling is instrumentalized.This offers us a perspective to understand Liu's design as a reflection on modernism and the cultural loss it has caused. Liu said that "the International Style, which proliferated from the rise of Modernism, has destroyed some of the most precious aspects of our culture—but this was never the original intention of the pioneers of Modernism"[29]Clearly, at that time, resistance for Liu implied a partial revival; the ideals he sought to inherit were first and foremost those of Modernism, and only secondarily the valuable elements of traditional culture that could be recalled. Liu called his design method a "low-tech strategy." He wrote: "The idea of 'low-tech' confronts reality by choosing relative technical simplicity, emphasizing economic feasibility, and stressing the excavation and use of the advantages embedded in ancient civilizations. It aims to achieve high artistic quality through low cost and low technical means, striking a balance between economic conditions, technical capacity, and architectural art. In doing so, it explores a strategy of building suited to countries or regions that are economically underdeveloped yet culturally rich"[30]

Liu's early project Heduoling[31] Studio, a 400-square-meter structure located in the rural outskirts of Chengdu, has long since been abandoned. The building employed a brick-concrete structure, and Liu did not shy away from admitting that this choice was made because people only wanted to pay the price of brick while expecting the style of concrete.[32] Brick, at the time, was a widely used and inexpensive material in China. The bricks used in the building were of poor quality, much like the craftsmanship of the peasant construction crew that built it. Yet Liu embraced this reality, metaphorically referring to the bricks as "crops from the earth."[33]This metaphor implies that local, coarse materials could be

[28] Yin Guojun, *Post-Modern Mixed Architecture* (Southwest Normal University Press, 2008), 209-211.
[29] Liu Jiakun, "Advance to the origin," in *Avant-Garde Today No.8, 34*.
[30] Liu Jiakun, *Now and Here* (China Architecture and Building Press, 2002), 13-14.
[31] He Duoling, born in 1948 in Chengdu, is one of the representative artists of contemporary Chinese lyrical realism oil painting.
[32] Ibid., 41.
[33] Ibid.

assimilated into the realm of modern architecture through Liu Jiakun's experimental practices. Or more precisely, Liu was astute—not so much embracing these materials as he was recognizing their romantic significance for rural inhabitants who, at the time, were still deeply embedded in that socio-material context. The Chinese identification with notions of locality is deeply bound to the traditional values of self-sufficiency rooted in smallholder agrarian economies. Under such traditional economic structures, society relied on villages and family units for both production and sustenance. The ideal was one of self-reliance, independent from external markets. This lifestyle draws its legitimacy from Confucian political philosophy, which upholds order and stability as its core values. For Confucianism, the ideal social model was not an expansive, capitalist urban civilization, but a stable rural society centered on the ethos of "farming and reading" as the foundation of family heritage. Liu's low-tech approach represent a kind of distinctly Chinese utopian vision. As Jabareen and Eizenberg remind us, with fantasmatic logic, it is possible to explain how and why specific articulations and practices of spatial formation are constructed, maintained, and transformed.[34]Clearly, Liu's strategy serves as a fantasmatic supplement, filling an emotional and symbolic void in the project of modern architecture in China.

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Figure 4. Heduoling Studio

Several years later, Liu Jiakun revised his earlier position, stating that the so-called "low-tech strategy (not low-tech style) was merely a tactical compromise...a mistake accepted out of helplessness... not a strategic maneuver intended to pit Asian conditions against Western theories."[36]Liu thus acknowledged his use of low-tech methods as a strategy but explicitly distanced himself from the idea of a "low-tech style." Nevertheless, despite his rhetorical attempts to avoid stylistic interpretations, Liu's works continued to be labeled by the public, media, and architectural critics as emblematic of a low-tech aesthetic. More significantly, Liu

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[34] Yosef Jabareen and Efrat Eizenberg, "Theorizing Urban Social Spaces and Their Interrelations: New Perspectives on Urban Sociology, Politics, and Planning," *Planning Theory* 20, no. 3 (December 3, 2020): 147309522097694, https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095220976942.
[35] Figure 4, Heduoling Studio, by Liu Jiakun. *Now and Here*, 41.
[36] Liu Jiakun, "My Architectural Practice in Western China," *Time + Architecture*, no. 4 (January 1, 2006): 45–47, 46.

himself never explicitly refuted these external interpretations. In fact, he seemed to tolerate, or perhaps even strategically accept—the ambiguity, allowing it to lend his work a kind of vernacular legitimacy. As Liu gained fame, he was commissioned with increasingly large-scale projects. Material scarcity and financial limitations were no longer part of his architectural conditions. Therefore, Liu's practice gradually moved away from the earlier context of experiment and entered a new phase shaped by capital. In 2010, he began the design for West Village Basis Yard, which was completed in 2015.[37] The project reproduces certain formal strategies reminiscent of Chang Yung Ho's Quanzhou Contemporary Small Art Museum, particularly a binary logic that separates facade and space. The facade once again features recycled bricks and exposed concrete, while the spatial organization draws on the typology of the dayuan (yard), to evoke a sense of nostalgic collectivism. Originally, the dayuan referred to traditional, enclosed residential compounds such as siheyuan or clan dwellings. But in the decades following the founding of the People's Republic of China, the dayuan gradually evolved into a spatial system associated with the work-unit structure, binding together work and daily life within a closed institutional framework. West Village Basis Yard ends up imprisoning modern modes of living, instead recalling a highly collectivized way of life. Commercial, residential, office, and cultural functions are all folded into the same huge yard. It is difficult to say whether this constitutes a regression—but what is certain is that Liu Jiakun's architectural experiments have been fully absorbed by the logic of capitalism.
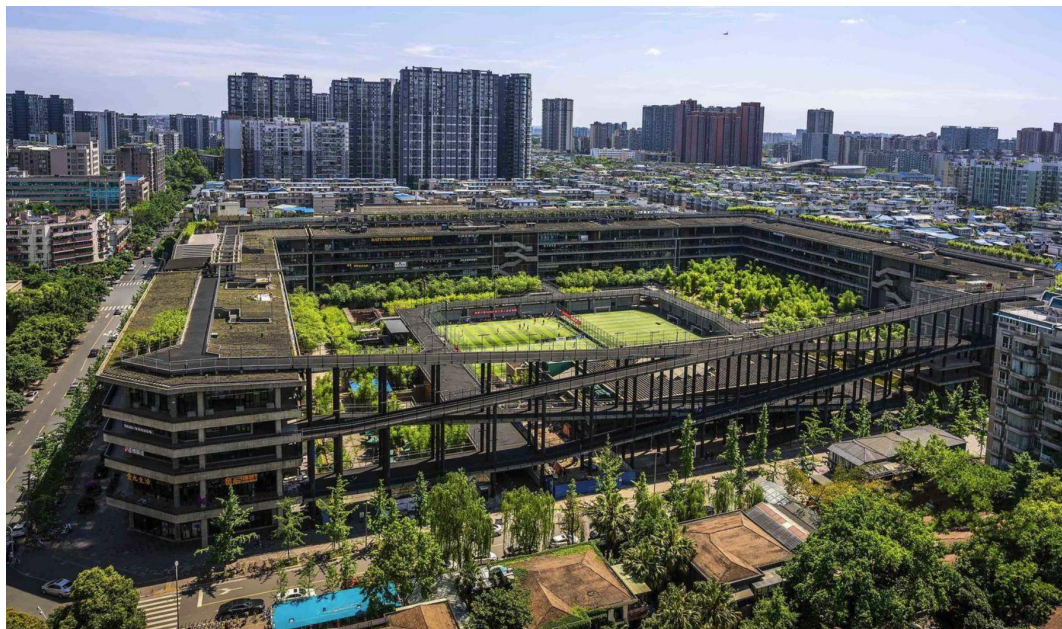

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Figure 5. The West Village

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[37] Jiakun Architects, "Project Details of the West Village," Jiakun.com, 2015, https://www.jiakun.com/project/detail?id=18.
[38] Figure 5, Ibid.

This is the end of architectural experimentation. Or rather, if architects wish not to see the experiment prematurely terminated, they must willingly proceed toward this conclusion. Architects possess the authority to experiment, but not the power to initiate or to judge the experiment. Political and economic forces drive architectural experiments—and also absorb their outcomes, at least in the case of buildings that actually get constructed. Postwar Europe's mass social housing is a clear example: the leftist welfare state's grand ambitions ended in austerity and shifting social structures. The residents' non-cooperation was also among the reasons for the failure of some experimental housing, but this is partly because residents are, first and foremost, social beings—not experimental subjects. Architectural experiments always contain uncontrollable variables, and any influence architects hope to exert upon residents must pass through existing structures of power. In China, without state-level policy openings, architectural experiments have no opportunity to begin. From the very start, experiments are attached to specific power structures—structures that are more a priori than the very ones the experiment supposedly resists. As a result, every step of the experimental process inevitably resonates with those structures in ways that cannot be controlled. Therefore, the goal of this essay is not to deny the value of experimentation itself, because the notion of a "pure" experiment is a paradox. Rather, this essay attempts to supplement experimentation by offering a critique of its motives. Architectural experimentation is a form of boundary work, a disciplinary self-preservation mechanism. As Monika Kurath has noted, "the boundary work emerging in the transformation of architecture into a research discipline is framed by the epistemic culture of architecture."[39]Thus, a critical perspective must look beyond the experimental position or the architect's mode of engagement, and turn toward the epistemic culture that such experiments help shape. Social beings cannot be absent from this epistemological space. Xu Yinong has observed that although the traditional Chinese horse-head walls exhibit rich typological variety, today people prefer "a simplified, geometricised version in a modern interpretation."[40]Is this not a symptom of the overabundance of experimental rhetoric in contemporary Chinese architecture?

One of the core issues of Chinese architectural experimentation lies in the imbalance with which the avant-garde has approached history and tradition. This imbalance is closely related to the cultural disposition of many leading experimental architects, who embody a distinctly literati temperament. In traditional Chinese society, the literati were considered upper class, while craftsmen and engineers were relegated to the lower ranks. Once this cultural superiority is projected onto architecture, it deeply shapes the character of experimentation. As a result, even the "low-tech," "handmade," or "vernacular" elements in their work ultimately serve the needs of humanistic self-representation. It is a gesture of humility, but one that is paternalistic—a condescending compassion from the architects toward the workers. This helps us understand what Monika Kurath means when she writes that some architectural

[39] Monika Kurath, "Architecture as a Science: Boundary Work and the Demarcation of Design Knowledge from Research," *Science & Technology Studies* 28, no. 3 (January 1, 2015): 81–100, https://doi.org/10.23987/sts.55343, 83.
[40] Xu Yinong, "The Universal and the Local: Some New Features in the Built Environment of Contemporary China," *The Journal of Architecture* 23, no. 2 (February 17, 2018): 310–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2018.1443344.

research "depicted architectural work as being framed by ideals such as individuality, singularity, a specific architectural gaze and a talent- and genius-oriented paradigm."[41]

Experimentation, at its core, must be a movement. But Chinese experimental architects, through their acts of referencing tradition, have brought this movement to a halt. In other words, it is through the endless appropriation of tradition that the experimental impulse has been neutralized. Once the experiment begins, the self-evolving nature of tradition ceases to exist. Tradition becomes an archive—something suspended from its historical context to serve as fragments in modern architectural production, preventing the collapse of experimental meaning. Chinese architectural experimentation has become an endless game with tradition, and in this process, the original motivation for experimentation fades. The experiment becomes locked within specific typologies and, to some extent, refuses to engage with modernity. Tradition becomes a form of boundary work, but in doing so, it generates new boundaries around itself — boundaries that quickly become an object of collective enjoyment. Once experimentation becomes a method, more precisely, a fixed method; it grants discourse to the architect, symbols to capital, and to society, a lifestyle assumed to be modern. Experimental architecture may have generated a new interpretive and evaluative system, but we are all aware that within this system, the experiment no longer exists.

*Beijing will host the 30th UIA World Congress of Architects in 2029. The last time this congress was held in Beijing was in 1999, which featured *The Exhibition of Young Architects of China*. Will there be new experiments this time?

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[41] Monika Kurath, Architecture as a Science: Boundary Work and the Demarcation of Design Knowledge from Research, 86

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