

Chinese Architecture in an Age of Turmoil, 200–600. By Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press; Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014. Pp. xxix + 465. \$68.00/HKD530.00.

Often one's impression of Chinese architecture is that it has remained constant in its form and function during the imperial eras. However, such a statement is more a sweeping generalization than one based on substantive research. One of the difficulties facing scholars of Chinese architecture history is the lack of direct evidence of buildings between 2000 B.C.E. to around 500 C.E. The earliest standing wooden buildings date from the late eighth century C.E., and not more than a dozen timber structures remain from the first millennium C.E. There might be stone and brick architecture including pagodas, gates, or tombs from the earlier times, but it could be difficult to analyse and suggest evidence of Chinese architecture prior to the Tang dynasty (618–907). Although in recent scholarship, the architecture of China and neighbouring regions is explored, the fact that so few wooden buildings, the predominant building structures in China, are extant from before the Song dynasty (960–1279) seriously hampers our understanding and perception of the architecture of the first millennium C.E.

This is precisely the gargantuan contribution of *Chinese Architecture in an Age of Turmoil, 200–600*, by Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt. As the title suggests, the 465-page book focuses on gathering and analysing evidence of the Chinese architecture of the most chaotic and exuberant period of Chinese history and its rippling influence on neighbouring countries and principalities. The four hundred years of history covered by the book saw the division of China into North and South China, with at least thirty-one ruling kingdoms or sovereignties, starting with Eastern Han (25–220) and ending in the unified Sui dynasty (581–618) (p. xxii). This explains the apt title of the book: the Age of Turmoil, being an attempt to make sense of the architectural tradition of these four extraordinary centuries which had inherited the strength of the powerful Han dynasty and laid the foundation for another glorious epoch of Chinese history: the Sui and Tang. It is also important to note that apart from the indigenous development of Chinese architecture, this period also saw a vibrant cultural interchange between central China and the outer regions, the rule of north China by non-ethnic Chinese, the introduction of Buddhism, and cultural transmission to the Korean peninsula and Japan.

But the problem with gaining a comprehension of architecture of this period has always been the serious lack of examples of buildings, the obscure language used to describe the buildings, and the diversity of ethnic and foreign influences seen in the art and culture of the four centuries in question. Apart from some fantastic architectural remains, such as the pagoda of Songyue monastery 嵩嶽寺 on Song mountain in Henan province, the archaeological discovery of the foundations of

the pagoda and building of Yongning monastery 永寧寺 in Luoyang, or major literary descriptions such as *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 (Record of Monasteries in Luoyang) by Yang Xuanzhi 楊銜之, what we have are but fragmentary records and samples of architecture from the period. Is it then possible to reconstruct the architecture of the third to sixth centuries in China? Nancy Steinhardt has proven in this book that it is possible to assemble a large amount of evidence to show the general trend of development of architecture with external influences during this period. This is an extremely significant contribution of the book.

Organization of the book is primarily chronological. The first part with two chapters lays out the approach of the book and the background of Han dynasty architecture of the preceding period before 200 C.E. Then the four main chapters of Part Two follow with a chapter a century. Each of these centuries is given a subtitle—for example the third century is subtitled the “Emergence of Buddhist Architecture.” The subtitles are useful to give a summary of the significant architectural manifestations of each of the “Four Centuries of Great Monuments.” Then Part Three serves as a conclusion of the book with chapter 7 on “Patterns and Achievements” of the architecture of the four centuries. The last chapter deals with the broader issues of textual evidence of the earliest Buddhist architecture, the oldest extant wooden buildings in China (of the eighth to ninth centuries), and early Buddhist architecture in Korea and Japan. The chronological treatment of the vast amount of materials amassed by the author over a large geographical reach is sensible. The clarity of the structure of the book is further enhanced by the sub-sections within each chapter, aimed to highlight certain monuments, building types, or architectural patterns within each century.

So the key question is what do we know about architecture of third to sixth century China from the book? Or what do we not know? Of course what we can know about architectural history is primarily predicated on the nature and amount of sources of evidence of the period presented. The main sources of information for the book include: archaeological discovery of cities, building foundations and ancient tombs; extant brick and stone structures, predominantly Buddhist pagodas and cave temples; images from carved objects or stone surfaces; and textual sources. Apart from foundation remains which speak clearly of spatial organization of a building, or cave temple fronts, pagodas and stone sarcophagi which provide some indications of the three dimensional aspect of a building, other sources are subject to a fair bit of interpretation. Are images on painted surfaces meant to be read as the form of actual buildings? Can two-dimensional carvings be used to reconstruct three-dimensional buildings? How about the poetic languages used in texts? How accurate are the reconstructions from mere archaeological evidences?

Steinhardt is able to negotiate through these kinds of evidence with great finesse

and rigour. For example, when referring to Han dynasty relief sculpture and rubbings of it, the author cautions us that: “one cannot forget that these are funerary objects . . . the relief sculpture that lines the walls of tomb chambers are symbolic décor of the afterlife” (pp. 87, 89). Careful interpretation of source materials is essential and prudent. Thus one would like to see the author stating very clearly her view and approaches in using these source materials; that is, what do they represent or not represent. Because of the lack of physical remains and the limitation of information, the conclusions drawn in the book would have to be guarded and will never be fully comprehensive. And this is precisely the approach taken by the author.

Not a lot of materials can be gathered in third century China, thus chapter 3 can only draw the conclusion that: “Architecture of third-century China—religious, in miniature, palatial, and funerary—from Xinjiang to Gansu to Hubei, drew from a Gandhāran past for monasteries and from Han for other building forms. Yet every type of building except the *que* is different from first- or second-century CE predecessors” (p. 113). For monasteries of the third century, there is hardly any evidence from central China, and thus the author concentrates only on the archaeological remains of monastic complexes located in Central Asia, now in the Xinjiang region, of which the dates are not easy to identify. Clearly the form of these monasteries or simply stupas is derived from northwest India and Pakistan, but the nature of transmission from the Gandhāra region or further afield cannot be absolutely ascertained. Likewise, for palaces, the author relies on prose to suggest the predominant building type of palatial architecture of the third century were high towers and enormous pavilions connected by covered corridors. Here the evidence is rather thin, even though an attempt in reconstruction and a wall painting of a later period from Maijishan 麥積山 grottoes are cited. This is just to demonstrate the scale of the difficulty in identifying and describing fully the architecture of this early period of third-century China.

The next century has yielded slightly more evidence than the third century in the forms of Buddhist grottoes and burial sites. Obviously, these sources, abundant though they may, cannot fully disclose the nature and development of architecture of the period. While it is obviously true that “Buddhist monasteries and cave-temples permanently altered the landscape and building practices of every region of China and many points to the west before the end of the fourth century” (p. 122), we have hardly any extant evidence, particularly from central China. Most of the evidence of cave temples cited in the book is not from central China, as the earliest cave temple sites in China, mainly in the Hexi 河西 corridor, are from the late fourth century. As for burial architecture, the author looks at excavated tombs both in the northwest and the northeast, and singles out the elements that are clearly imitations of timber-frame architecture and the use of decorative elements that might also be seen in buildings,

concluding that: “The legacy of construction above and below ground of the fourth century was the advancement in using the permanent aimed at achieving permanence” (p. 137). Obviously, it is extremely difficult to achieve permanence with timber architecture, thus the phenomenon of using the language of timber architecture in brick and stone tombs of far-flung areas of the Chinese territories points to the spread of a symbolic architectural language to express status and permanence.

The materials from the fifth and sixth centuries are more abundant and received more in-depth analysis in the book than those from the preceding two centuries. This is based on the flourishing of Buddhist monuments in China beginning in the fifth century in a wide-ranging manner. Much of chapter 5 is devoted to examining the cave temples at Dunhuang 敦煌, Hexi corridor, Maijishan, Yungang 雲岡, Wanfodong 萬佛洞, and south China. In the survey, the author focuses on the spatial form of the individual caves, and the use of elements of timber architecture in both the front façade of the caves and their interior. The basic assumption for the narrative is that: “China surely recognized that accommodations to its architectural system were necessary for the new Buddhist gods. Long aware of the lure of stone as a permanent material, it viewed the cave-chapel was an opportunity to reinterpret existing construction. Yet China could not abandon timber framing in sanctified stone houses of the Buddhist gods any more than in tombs. The result of this convergence was that some of the best examples of wooden building components survive in early cave-temples” (p. 161). And Steinhardt summarizes the four wooden elements seen in the interior of Dunhuang Mogao 莫高 cave temple, namely: framed ceiling, central pillar, single tier bracket set, and mother-son *que*. It is said that the first two elements can be found in religious architecture in Asia, and the last two are more indigenously China (p. 162). As for Yungang, the author suggests that “usually the architectural detail at the Yungang caves seems to be a fairly accurate reflection of the most noteworthy components of the Chinese wooden building tradition” (p. 171).

The idea that the dominance of timber frame architecture meant its form had to be re-produced in stone or cave temples requires further discussion. It is a common understanding that Chinese architecture privileged timber construction for more than a few thousand years, and many, particularly those coming from a stone tradition, postulate the reason for this. However, none can quite explain comprehensively the preference for timber construction. Indeed, there might not be any one particular reason but the inertia of the culture. Even when there is a strong desire to represent wooden construction in carving or plaster relief in cave temples, it might not be for permanence. It might be for giving an impression that it is wooden structure just like a timber hall for housing the Buddha. How are the elements for representation selected? It might be based on simple symbolic messages, such as a small projecting wooden bracket off the wall in Northern Wei caves at Dunhuang that seems sufficient

to suggest a timber-frame hall for housing the Buddha. But is it possible to understand the full scope of Chinese architecture of the period by examining the selected elements extant in the cave temple? For example: it is common to see single tier brackets in the cave temple but hardly any more complicated bracketing which must have been rather common in above ground buildings. Very clearly it is not possible to gain a full view of contemporaneous architecture by looking at the little fragments in cave temple sites. It thus begs the question of how fully the decorated elements in cave temples or tombs are able to represent the actual timber frame buildings. It might require our exploration of the process of selection of motifs and their possible interpretation before we can begin to suggest and estimate how much these motifs represent actual timber structure buildings which no longer exist. The author suggests in a later chapter, with more abundant information than that from the fifth century, that: “The skill of artisans in rendering each kind of architecture so clearly further confirms that it was specific details and perhaps their association with rank, not free-style decoration, that lay behind these images. . . . The detail and widespread use of the same elements indicate that by the final decades of the sixth century the Chinese structural system was widely revealed and imitated” (pp. 246–47). I agree with this approach of viewing the elements depicted in tomb, wall surfaces, paintings, and objects not simply as decoration but as components that carry further and deeper meaning.

Among all four centuries, chapter 6, which deals with the period between 500 and 600 C.E., is possibly the most comprehensive in presenting the widest possible information for understanding the architecture of the period. Thus it allows us the deepest understanding of the full extent of architectural form of the time. However, much more information is available for northern China than for the south, and in north China, most narrative centres on Gao Huan 高歡 (496–547), the regent of Eastern Wei (534–47) and father of Gao Yang 高洋 (526–559), the first emperor of the Northern Qi. This information includes the ancestral temple of Gao Huan at Ye 鄴, the Gao family tomb, monasteries that might have been founded by Gao Huan or his family, and cave temples founded by Gao Huan, primarily Xiangtangshan 響堂山 and Tianlongshan 天龍山, described by the author as Gao Huan’s legacy. The purpose of Gao’s building efforts is suggested by Steinhardt to be an imitation of “the architectural programs of Northern Wei” (p. 208). With the specific historical circumstances surrounding the ambition of Gao to unite north China, such reading of the intention of Gao is plausible.

The chapter extensively discusses Buddhist pagodas and cave temples: the iconic pagoda of Yongning monastery erected in Luoyang by Empress Dowager Hu 胡太后 in 516, the pagoda of Songyue monastery of 523, and smaller pagodas of Shentong monastery 神通寺 and Xiuding monastery 修定寺. There is textual information ranging

from a colossal wooden pagoda to extant brick and stone pagodas of various sizes and scales. The analysis of these pagodas centres around the process of formal transformation of pagodas from their Indian origin to their Chinese adaptation: “this first century of extant Buddhist monumental construction in China confirms that the pagoda not only had made a triumphant arrival but also was fully implanted in China” (p. 213). Indeed, this is the significant period of the flourishing of Buddhist pagodas in China and perhaps the best time to uncover the process of adaptation in greater detail.

The other focus of the chapter is on major cave temple sites in Dunhuang, Xiangtangshan, Tianlongshan, Maijishan, and Kizil, supplemented by smaller cave temple sites. In these cave temples, discussions centre on individual elements, such as the façade, structural elements, or interior structural representations; as well as painted images of full complexes of buildings, including individual halls, pagodas, and building complexes. Comparison with known, extant buildings or foundations is the main method used. And the author concludes that: “Like so much religious architecture in a pious age, Buddhist cave-temple construction demonstrates the grandeur of political ambition alongside small caves built through devotional acts of monks and worshippers who probably never entered a site like Xiangtangshan. The sixth century was also an age when monuments raised to glorify local piety came to the attention of rulers” (p. 235). This conclusion should be elaborated further to take account of the patronage patterns between the ruler and the local, pertaining to the many cave temple sites throughout the breadth of China at the time. Finally, evidence from sarcophagi from the century is discussed. In the context of the Sogdian owner, the chief purpose of creating the sarcophagi as buildings with elaborate bracket sets is revealed as temples for the deceased.

The available evidence from the sixth century is sufficient for an in-depth understanding of architecture of the period which might be consistent throughout the vast territory of China with influences from traditions outside central China. Thus the author concludes: “A unified building system stretched from Xinjiang to Korea, blind to the ethnicities or histories of those who implemented it. The South Asian origins of the Buddhist architecture that became part of that system occasionally identify themselves, but the approach of the year 600 presented not only a China ripe for unification but also a system of architectural forms that had preserved remarkably much of Han in stone, brick, and even some wood, above and below the ground” (p. 247). While this conclusion is an apt summary of what we might be able to understand from the available evidence from the four centuries as a continuum from Han to Tang dynasties, it might also be good to discuss the significant role of this period in the assimilation and indigenization of foreign architecture construction into accepted Chinese forms.

The final Part Three is subtitled “Understanding and Resolution of Architecture in an Age of Turmoil.” The first chapter in this part summarizes the information gathered from these four centuries into “patterns and achievements.” From the basis of this summary, the author goes on to look at Korean and Japanese extensions of Chinese prototypes. The patterns that the author discusses include planned space; structural components; pattern, decoration, elaboration, and ornament; the composite structures; Sui; ceilings; and eight-sided construction. For spatial design, the author concentrates on burial space, which is understandable as only burial sites reveal a full extent of spatial arrangements. Steinhardt makes the distinction of the period before and after the Buddhist entrance into Chinese society in the number of chambers and ornamentation. Buddhism might be a factor, but the very turbulent times of the fifth and sixth centuries can also be another factor for simpler burial practice. For structural components, the discussion concludes with the postulation of Fu Xinian 傅熹年, a renowned architectural historian, of five structural types seen in the period. And the remaining discussions of chapter 7 elaborate on individual components in the structural, decorative schemas, as well as building forms. One thread is to study the process of transmission and adaptation, concerning which according to the author: “The specific sources and meanings and routes of transmission of decorative motifs are so challenging to define precisely because the third through sixth centuries was both an age of ornamentation and an age without clear borders. It was an age of cross-fertilization in which the peoples at the borders, many of them seminomads . . . were actively seeking new decorative patterns and designs; . . . gave them no reason to resist the Chinese building system. Changes observed in Chinese architecture as a result of fluid, dynamic borders and dozens of centers of royal patronage were in decorative elements. The wooden architecture . . . remained a simple frame of composite, standardized parts” (pp. 263–64). Much still has to be done in this area of detailed studies of the process of transmission and process of indigenization. The book points to a general direction and provides some examples for engaging in such work.

The last chapter of the book deals with extant architecture, primarily Buddhist, of Korea and Japan, mostly from the seventh century. For historical studies of Chinese architecture prior to the Song, examples in Korea and Japan are very important as they are contemporaneous with the extant brick or stone buildings in China, and much earlier than the first wooden building that survives in China from late eighth century. This has been the practice of historiography in modern times. This book is thus no exception. However, how can one interpret these examples in relation to the development in China? Can we assume that seventh century Korean and Japanese architecture must reflect architecture from sixth century China? The elements that are usually examined in such discussions are spatial plan, location of the pagoda

and golden hall within the main cloister, construction of wooden, brick and stone buildings, and detailed decorations. The author takes the position that: “A Chinese prototype for Three Kingdoms period Korean monasteries is likely, but it cannot be proved” (p. 316). And related to this which the author finds hard to reconcile is: “Related to the proof is how much is missing from the archaeological record in China and what one does with the literary record when it cannot be supported by physical evidence. Also relevant is the extent to which Buddhist caves and tombs inform us about architecture aboveground” (p. 316).

Similarly, when dealing with Japanese examples, which consist of many wooden halls and pagodas from the seventh century, the author is interested to see how much of the Chinese prototypes can be detected in these extant buildings, or excavated remains. The tone is optimistic: “Investigation of excavated remains of Chinese and Korean architecture alongside Japan’s buildings has taught us that the monastery plan represented by Yongningsi and widespread in the Paekche kingdom was used in early Japanese monasteries” (p. 342). In addition to the spatial layout, the author is also interested to see that: “The most exciting new understanding of Japan’s oldest wooden architecture is that so many of its prominent features are present in Han tombs. . . . the reliability of architectural details in Ikaruga for information about pre-Tang wooden construction in China and Korea is emphatic” (p. 342). Thus the author proposes a continental style that might have been formed in the Later Han dynasty and might have been preserved in the earliest monasteries in Japan. However, the author is also cautious and does not wish to push this argument too far: “It seems appropriate to state one more time that neither the purpose nor an anticipated outcome of this study is to portray the Han empire as the greatest diffusionists nor most successful colonizers in global history, even if there is some truth to the assessment” (p. 344). The link between continental style and buildings of seventh century Japan cannot be denied. However, the author has not been able to be conclusive about the route and form of transformation because of the lack of evidence.

The questions that were asked at the beginning of the book were answered in the Postscript. The short section is also one that serves as the conclusion of the book. The view that “by the end of the sixth century, East Asia was a Buddhist world even in funerary construction, and to the extent that there was uniformity or shared forms in architecture, it is Han China as well as Buddhism that were responsible” (p. 344) is substantiated by the abundance of evidence the author has gathered. The only issue is that due to the nature of materials available, it might not be fair to suggest that Buddhism had such a strong influence on architecture form of the four centuries. There must have been an even larger number of city gates, palaces, official buildings, temples, mansions, and houses in existence at the time in addition to the monasteries. To establish the influence of Buddhism on architecture, it is also necessary to look

into the changes seen in building design pre- and post- third to sixth centuries to ascertain the influence of the foreign religion on local culture.

The study of Chinese architecture has concentrated on the study of the structural system since the 1930s. This is also a conclusion that the author draws: “The third through sixth centuries was an age in which the success of the Chinese architectural system, both its ease of adoption and its desirability, could be tested. The success is validated by the continued use of the fundamental components of the Chinese timber frame not only in the nearly three hundred years of rule under the Tang but by eighth-century architecture in Japan as well” (p. 345). The system that the author refers to is the construction and structural system with timber as the primary material. However, as very few timber elements have survived from the third to sixth centuries, how can we understand the system fully? The author also suggests that: “We have also seen that standardization does not mean that change and evolution do not occur in the Chinese building system. . . . The beauty of the system is that even as its features change and thus provide a few ways to date buildings, the fundamentals of the system resist change” (p. 346). The generalization might be true to some extent; however, more needs to be done to see the full scope of the standardization and what variety in form and details some buildings can achieve.

Overall, the book is an excellent collection of information of archaeological materials pertaining to architecture of China during the third to sixth centuries. The materials are further studied with textual sources and extant examples. The task is not straightforward and it is to the author’s credit that the materials collected are beyond one’s expectation. The narrative behind the evidence is lucid; the archaeological discoveries, the decoration on objects or cave temples are presented in detail so that a good sense of the architecture in this tumultuous period can be gained. The book filled a gap in our knowledge of the development of architecture in China between the two greatest dynasties, as well as across the wide expanse of the territory from present-day Xinjiang to northern Korea. The architectural examples studied are mainly tomb chambers and Buddhist sites, which in the Chinese building tradition are bona fide subjects for understanding architecture on the ground. Because of the availability of materials, it is inevitable that the analysis would conclude that the arrival of Buddhism had brought a renewed sense of grandeur to Chinese architecture due to imperial patronage and donated wealth. The questions raised at the beginning of the book, such as the reason for the enduring quality of Chinese architecture, have not been answered fully, mainly due to the limitation of source materials, and perhaps with more materials unearthed in the future, we might have a clearer picture.

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