

# A Book Review of Exporting Chinese Architecture: History, Issues and “One Belt One Road”



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## Introduction

The first two decades of the twentieth-first century have witnessed the growing scholarly attention paid to the history of transnational architectural production, which demonstrated the dynamic flow of people, ideas, goods, and technical know-how, especially from the Second World to the Third World during the Cold War [1-5]. Exporting Chinese Architecture is the first English monograph on the subject of China-aided architecture built in the rest of the world, providing international readers with a window through which to understand the contexts, practices, and consequences of China's engagement with the globe through material constructions. The editors Charlie Xue and Guanghui Ding worked together with 20 other scholars to conduct a comprehensive and systematic review of China's aid construction process from multiple perspectives. The collected 13 articles are organized into three parts, namely “Historical Narrative”, “Cross-Border Design and Construction” and “One Belt and Road”. According to the editors' statistics, over the past 60 years, more than 1,500 buildings were subsidized by the Chinese government and built by Chinese professionals in more than 160 countries, involving an investment equivalent to more than 100 billion US dollars. Sixty years (1958-2018) of construction assistance and cooperation are all connected and underlined by “transformational modernism” put forward by the editors. This “transformational modernism” changed the face of many cities in developing countries, and also Chinese architecture itself.

Xue and Ding had already analyzed the role of design institutes in offering foreign aid under the chapter “Architectural Export from China's Design Institutes” in their earlier book A History of Design Institutes in China: from Mao to market. In the short

review of the book, Kenneth Frampton expressed his interest in “how Chinese modern culture spreads to the developing countries through design institutes, especially in Africa and Southeast Asian countries”. As an expansion of the topic mentioned by Frampton, Exporting Chinese Architecture explains the background, motives, principles, and features of China's aided constructions, and takes five questions as a guide to uncover the stories behind the production of foreign-aided buildings, including the international situation, diplomatic relationship, society, cultures, and economic situations. In addition, the local attitudes and evaluations towards China-aided buildings have also enriched the understanding of China's aided constructions. Ultimately, the editors believe that building quality is eventually the pursuit of the goal of China's exported architecture when designers and constructors face the tasks.

The first part is the interpretation of the historical context at the macro level. The evolution of architectural forms, materials, technologies, and aesthetics is a visible expression of the changing politics, economy, technology, foreign policy, and diplomatic relations in China. China's architectural aid has experienced three periods Woods [6]: 1) Free aid (1956-1978): To meet the local needs for modern industrialization and political performance, China assisted to build industrial facilities and public buildings in Mongolia, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, Guinea, Ghana, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, etc. 2) Reasonable aid (1979-1995): Under the market-oriented policy, Chinese government carried out rationalization reforms on aided construction, pursuing effective, fast, and low-cost works. 3) Institutionalized aid (1996-2018). The style, technology, and standards of aided construction are the factors that Chinese architects focused on. In Chapter 4, Amoah uses “Architecture diplomacy” to discuss space and rights with the National Theatre of Ghana as an example. He

believes that the political factors of China's aided architecture are overwhelming and points out the contradictions of the implementation process. While Chinese architects introduced local elements to express Ghanaian cultural attributes, Amoah was concerned about the lack of opportunity by local architects to participate in architectural design and the damage to the rural landscape, and ecological environment, arguing that Chinese engagement gave rise to what he called a "deformational modernism".

The second part is a detailed study of specific architectural types at the medium level. The local influence in combination with research and evaluation also be discussed. This part is a collection of four papers, the first three are special analyses of aided medical buildings (Tang, et al.), conference buildings Zhang et al. [7], and educational buildings [8]. The last chapter Zhang et al. [7] enlarges the view of the city and discusses the role of China's aided construction in the urban development of Djibouti and Addis Ababa. Overall, "designed in China, adapted to overseas" is the basic principle of architectural aid. China's foreign aid construction is generally based on the various development goals of the recipient countries and built to show China's positive image and enhance its soft power. The aided medical and health projects are deeply supported by the local people, improving the level of medical infrastructure, and having a positive social impact; while the parliament buildings, (international) conference centers, and stadiums are conducive to shaping the image of the recipient country as a landmark [9]. Such projects are the basis for the recipient country to be qualified to host international conferences and events, which in turn attract foreign investment for urban development [10]. However, these aided political edifices have received mixed reviews internationally. In contrast, education aid projects are more likely to gain respect and acclaim due to their international feature, humanitarian nature, and public benefit. These aid programs have created only a fragmented picture of the modern city, with limited impact on urban life, however.

The third part, focusing on the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, is the consideration of cases on a micro level under the policy guidance. This section shows how Chinese professionals have in recent decade engaged with the international world through architectural design and construction. In addition to traditional state-owned design institutes, design institutes such as IPPR and CCDI have also captured a portion of the market share of aided construction [11]. A series of events in the 21<sup>st</sup> century point to an international opportunity for greater integration. The overseas design practice is changing from the "philanthropic project" that emphasizes assistance to the "compound output" that realizes win-win value, with a shift from "project export" to "investment export" (Ai). This is completely consistent with China's current national strategy of "the One Belt and One Road" Initiative. Throughout the construction industry, promoting multilateral mechanisms with developing countries and actively developing cooperative partnerships is the trend of China's overall policy in

the future [7]. The history of aided construction proves China's construction strength, technology, and international cooperation capabilities. As an unpredictable "blue ocean"—unexplored new market areas, the overseas business and special features of Chinese large design enterprises still deserve further study and exploration [12].

In general, hundreds of projects mentioned and more than forty projects analyzed in this book can be summed up in two basic issues: first is the discussion and analysis of the Chinese model of foreign aid. In the international context, the relationship between "China, the West, Soviet socialism, and locality" is complex and intertwined. There is a worship of authority, but also a certain sense of common humanity and humanism. The authors concretize the abstract relationship between them, among which political preferences, tropical modernism, standard issues, and economic rationality are the focus of discussion. Second is an in-depth inquiry into how influential factors, especially non-architectural ones, are reflected in architectural entities. The development of aided architecture is undoubtedly related to external factors such as politics, economy, society, and culture. But this transformation is a multi-level and non-simultaneous complex process. In addition, the changes and continuity of Asian-African relations are evident throughout the history of China's architectural aid. Africa has more than 70% of aided projects and occupies an important position in China's foreign aid construction [13]. Following Asia, and Latin America, Africa began its modernization, rapid urbanization, and social reform. After independence, many African countries are highly dependent on foreign aid. Although African countries have their history and glorious native civilization, the uniqueness is missing due to the constraint of economic, colonial control, and political turmoil. In such a situation, aid eager for instant benefit would worsen the state, causing recipient countries to alleviate poverty but lose their vitality and identity [14]. Therefore, a reasonable and moderate model as well as a healthy cooperative construction relationship have always been the goals pursued by Chinese construction professionals.

Although this book provides a systematic and comprehensive review of the history of construction aid and conducts in-depth research on architectural cases, it lacks an overview of building types at the middle level. Perhaps due to the limited length of the introduction, the editors did not fully describe "more than 1,500 buildings subsidized by the Chinese government and built by Chinese professionals in more than 160 countries, including railways, stations, factories, theaters, stadiums, schools, hospitals, and government buildings.", and only three of these types were expanded. Other types of aid construction are also mentioned in the first and third parts of this book. The study of respective emergence, duration, quantity, and regional distribution of these types is likely to corroborate the shifts in bilateral international relations, political and economic policies, and development needs of recipient countries.

The practical significance of studying China's aided architecture is not to create a new field, rather, it is to integrate the research on "Third-world" countries into existing Chinese architectural research and practice, with the implication of rethinking Chinese contemporary architecture within a broader world network, thus avoiding isolated thinking and simplified operations [8]. As part of international development assistance, China's exported construction is a transnational practice shaped by geopolitics, power competition and cooperation, knowledge transfer, and the movement of people, capital, goods, and ideas [15]. Therefore, there is a need to look at Chinese aid issues from a global perspective and to combine common human standards of environmental values with the differentiated development paths adhered to by different regions. This stance of respect, civilization, fraternity, and sharing is rooted in the contemporary reflection of ancient Chinese wisdom.

Overall, Exporting Chinese Architecture is a fascinating and in-depth introduction to the process of China's construction aid. It is suitable not only for students and faculties of architecture but also for other readers interested in political history, social history, cultural history, art history, diplomacy and international relations, cross-cultural studies, etc. The book's informative historical materials, diverse protagonists, rich on-site surveys and photographs, and diverse perspectives provide a multifaceted record depicting the history of China's aid construction, like a piece of the puzzle, complementing the historical and theoretical discussion on China's modern and contemporary architecture. The authors strive to use interdisciplinary methods to achieve factual research, data statistics, text interpretation, formal analysis, and even cross-cultural comparison, adding new contexts and perspectives to stimulate the reader's thinking. Regardless of race, people from different political systems and cultures share the desire for a better life. Promoting the building of a world of common prosperity is not only the goal pursued by great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics but also the common mission of the international community. From this point of view, what will go out in the future is no longer a narrowly defined "Chinese design", but a closer and more diversified relationship between "China and the world".

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