



China's architectural aid: Exporting a transformational modernism

Guanghai Ding*, Charlie Q.L. Xue¹

Department of Architecture and Civil Engineering, City University of Hong Kong, Tat Chee Avenue, Kowloon, Hong Kong



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 11 February 2015

Keywords:

Chinese architecture
Architectural aid
Architectural export
Transformational modernism

ABSTRACT

China's architectural exports to less-developed countries, such as conference halls, government offices, hospitals, institutional headquarters, schools, stadia and theatres, have played a special role in the state's foreign aid and diplomatic strategy. Beginning in the late 1950s, such exported architectural projects were presented by the Chinese Communist Party-led government as gifts to many Asian and African nations in exchange for their ideological, political and diplomatic support. In the post-Mao era, these architectural exports were combined with economic assistance, debt relief and expanding market access, suggesting economic cooperation, political engagement and cultural communication. In this study, a range of typical buildings are woven with their particular historical and socio-political backgrounds into a cohesive narrative. This is the first attempt to examine and theorise the development and transformation of this distinctive phenomenon, using architectural aid as a lens through which to unpack the state's motivation for and the institutions/individuals' commitment to constructing China's global influence. It is argued that the exported architectural projects – profoundly marked by the state's intervention – demonstrated what we term a 'transformational modernism' that was both a product of social transformation in China and a positive engagement with the recipient nations' local conditions.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

In her 2011 book, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*, Deborah Brautigam investigated China's past and current aid activities in Africa, arguing that China's engagement with the continent was a practical investment and promise of mutual benefit (Brautigam, 2011). Brautigam's argument was supported by a thorough and authoritative account of Chinese activities in fields such as agriculture, infrastructure, telecommunications and industry, but she paid scant attention to architecture. As one of the most significant aspects of China's aid to less-developed countries, the architectural exports from the 1950s to the present day have epitomised this long-term, sophisticated commitment.² Compared with other countries' architectural exports to the so-called Third World, China's architectural aid has maintained the following key

features: state and state-owned design institutes' intervention; access to projects mainly through official aid programmes rather than by international competition and commission; a mix of architectural exports and other forms of political, economic and cultural engagement; architectural diversity; breadth of the recipient states involved; and continuity of architectural aid delivered.

In this study, how China used architectural aid to achieve its political, economic and cultural purposes is analysed, along with how Chinese architects were committed to cultivating a distinctive architectural culture by combining global influence, domestic experience and local circumstances. Like other countries, China used transnational architectural activities not only to support the recipient nations' development, but also to foster trade, seek economic interest and expand cultural influence. Beyond this overt intention, this article argues that China used architectural aid as an instrument of government policy to consolidate the ruling Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy both domestically and internationally. Within the framework of architectural export, Chinese architects endeavoured to deliver a 'transformational modernism' that integrated efficiency, affordability, accessibility and creativity. This progressive modern project was both a product of social transformation in China and a positive engagement with the recipient nations' local conditions.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: guanding@cityu.edu.hk (G. Ding), bscqx@cityu.edu.hk (C.Q.L. Xue).

¹ Tel.: +852 3442 7434.

² In this article, the term 'architectural export' is interchangeable with 'architectural aid', as the state dominated such architectural activities and the participation of independent individual Chinese architects in the global architectural market was still extremely rare.

Architectural aid in exchange for political support

China's architectural aid can be described as a social relationship with three key components – the donor, the recipients and the context in which they interacted. In the early 1950s, the newly established communist regime in the People's Republic of China encountered the political and military tension between the powers in the Western and the Eastern blocs. To consolidate its power in this hostile international climate, China aligned itself with the Soviet Union, from which it accepted economic aid (Dong & Wu, 2004). In 1955, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai escaped an assassination attempt while on route to the Bandung Conference held in Indonesia, a meeting of mostly newly independent Asian and African states. Zhou participated despite the close call, and his moderate and conciliatory attitude, particularly his promotion of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, helped formulate a concluding declaration that allayed the doubts and fears of some anti-communist delegates over China's intentions (Barnett, 1955). Shortly after the conference, China established diplomatic relations with more than 20 Asian and African countries and began to strengthen trade activity and expand foreign aid.

While the Soviet experts helped China establish a comprehensive industrial system, the assistance China afforded economically undeveloped countries enhanced its international image and prestige. China's use of economic aid as a tool to underpin its strategic, economic and diplomatic aims was initially demonstrated in 1958 in an official document written by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on the 'Request for Instructions on Strengthening the Foreign Economic, Technical Assistance Work Leadership'. The report emphasised that the similarities in the ideologies and historical experiences of China and the recipient

states played a critical role in determining the direction of Chinese aid (Zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, 1992). Among those recipients, Mongolia, one of the earliest countries to recognise Beijing's communist rule, received a substantial amount of goods and funds in the late 1950s. This economic and technical assistance primarily included the design and construction of civil projects and industrial factories and support in such forms as labour, materials, technologies and complete sets of equipment. As the central government acknowledged that foreign assistance was a complex and arduous project, a few special institutions, including the Central Foreign Affairs Group, the State Planning Commission and the Ministry of Finance, were responsible for organisation and coordination (Dangdai zhongguo congshu bianweihui, 1989). The Ministry of Building and Engineering, like other industrial ministries, was one of the principle sectors of delivery.

In terms of architectural aid in Mongolia, the Beijing Industrial Design Institute, a state-owned institute affiliated with the Ministry of Building and Engineering was credited for its efficient design performance in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Led by the architect Gong Deshun, the design team realised one international hotel, two luxury villas and one department store in the city of Ulan Bator (Figs. 1 and 2). In these buildings, Gong was preoccupied with the combination of modern principles and local conditions. He rejected the predominantly eclectic approaches clearly embodied in his Ministry of Building and Engineering project completed in Beijing in 1957.

Although the discourse characterising Beijing's architectural field in the 1950s was national in form and socialist in content (socialist realism), and the application of abstract formal languages was constrained profoundly by conservative ideologies, architectural aid nevertheless provided a rare opportunity for Chinese architects to explore modernist architecture in a different context. As the architectural historian Zou Denong noted, compared with the domestic sophisticated circumstance, the lowered limits of aid allowed architects to experiment with a critical modernist approach (Zou, 2001). Among the architecture exported during Mao's time, a comparable project that demonstrated Chinese architects' skill at integrating modern vocabularies with local



Fig. 1. Gong Deshun/The Beijing Industrial Design Institute, the Bogd Khan Mountain Hotel, 1959, Ulan Bator, Mongolia.
Source: Zhongguo jianzhu sheji yanjiuyuan chengli wushi zhounian jinian congshu: licheng pian.

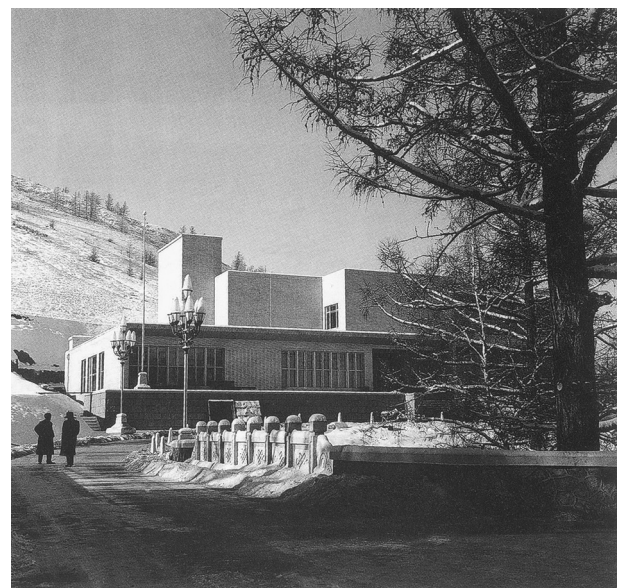


Fig. 2. Gong Deshun/The Beijing Industrial Design Institute, the Bogd Khan Mountain Guesthouse, 1960, Ulan Bator, Mongolia.
Source: Zhongguo jianzhu sheji yanjiuyuan chengli wushi zhounian jinian congshu: licheng pian.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1047888>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1047888>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)