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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.’¹ 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.² The word *feng* has multiple meanings, ranging from ‘sharp, acute’ and ‘cutting edge’ to ‘influential.’³ 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

¹One 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.

²The 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.

³Multiple 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.

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