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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Academic origins and characteristics of the Chinese stylistic restoration

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**KEYWORDS**Architecture conservation;  
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The conservation practice in China, termed “Chinese stylistic restoration” in this study, has been influenced by the traditional Chinese philosophy and construction principles, the modern Chinese conservation theory of Liang Sicheng and Liu Dunzhen, and Western and international theories and policies concerning conservation. This study uses three case studies, namely, Shanghai Zhenru Temple, Jianfu Palace Garden, and Angkor Wat Chau Say Tevoda Temple, to demonstrate the main characteristics of the Chinese stylistic restoration, including its emphasis on style over authenticity, pursuit of a gestalt form, and flexible attitude toward reconstruction. Accordingly, these practices have shaped the current Chinese conservation theory as reflected in the case studies reported in “Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China” and the Qufu Declaration.

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## 1. ‘Renovating the Old as Old’: the central principle of the Chinese stylistic restoration

Restoration is a component of all evolution stages of architecture; thus, all topics regarding architectural heritage conservation are rooted in restoration. However, in modern culture, the new ideologies that emerge with value rationality have made restoration a controversial topic on the value of conservation that has been debated for over 200 years. The argument between “stylistic restoration”

and “anti-restoration” reached its climax from 1830 to 1880. On the one hand, “stylistic restoration” was represented by Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1897), who attempted to restore the historical image of important French churches. On the other hand, “anti-restoration” was represented by John Ruskin (1819-1900), who called for maintaining architecture in its original form and objected to any fantasy about its original style (Jokilehto, 2002; Glendinning, 2013).

Eastern conservation theories and approaches entirely differ from Western ones. The spread of Western thought in the modern era has resulted in many Chinese social values and methodologies being brought in line with those of the rest of the world. However, the intrinsic cultural character

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of China continues to shape its heritage conservation activities. The restoration traditions and values of China, which are built on the ancient principles of cultural-relic conservation and are influenced by Taoism and the philosophical concept of Qi, remain intrinsic to the Chinese culture even though heritage conservation in China has been extensively influenced by the West. These traditions and values are also based on conservation theory in the late Qing dynasty, affected by Western learning, and influenced by the modern ideas of cultural-relic and architectural-heritage conservation that have emerged during the Republican period. Such naturalistic ideal of accommodating the past and present is reflected in the ancient Chinese principles of “renewing the decayed,” “revitalizing the abandoned,” and “completing the deficient.”

Research on the architectural heritage of China can be traced back to Zhi Qiqian’s establishment of the Yingzao Society in 1930. Most of these studies have adopted the academic system approach introduced by Liang Sicheng and Liu Dunzhen. As the father of modern Chinese architecture, Liang served as an architectural history instructor and became a prominent figure in the restoration and conservation of priceless monuments in China. His thoughts on architectural conservation were first published in 1986 by Chen Zhihua in the *Architectural Journal* article titled “A Pioneer in the Conservation of Building Relics and Historic Sites in China” (Chen, 1986b). To commemorate his 90th birthday in 1991, a research group from the Tsinghua University School of Architecture published several papers on Liang’s ideas about ancient city conservation and urban planning. In 2001, Liang’s approach to architectural conservation was discussed in several articles, such as Liang Sicheng’s “Thoughts on Building Relics Conservation” (Lv, 2001) and “Historical Investigation on Liang and Chen Plan” (Wang, 2001). In addition, several overseas scholars have analyzed Liang’s design theories from various perspectives (Lai, 2009; Li, 2012). These scholars have summarized Liang’s ideas on architectural conservation as follows.

First, Liang introduced the architectural conservation principle of “renovating the old as old” (i.e., renovating old architectural works while retaining their original style) in “A Plan for Renovating Wanshou Pavilion on Jingshan Mountain of the Imperial Palace” (Liang, 1934). He noted that “in terms of fine art, the most important principle of the conservation of relics is to retain the original exterior, so color paintings on parts not renovated should not be renewed but retained. Newly added beams, columns, rafters, purlins, sparrow braces, doors, windows and ceilings and so on should be painted and patterned following the old tradition, thus ensuring consistency with the original parts” (Liang, 1934).

Second, Liang opined that “restoration is complex, and can be carried out only when the person in charge has the most solid understanding of the shape and structure of the original building; if the restored is not true to the original, it is better to retain the existing parts and avoid reflecting the effects of time on the architecture. The restoration of ancient architecture has become a major controversial issue among architecture archeologists, and has not yet been settled by the Ministry of Education of Italy; in my opinion, the best way to preserve ancient architecture is to retain its

existing form. Restoration should not be implemented hastily or without absolute certainty” (Liang, 1932).

Third, with regard to the use of new materials and technologies, Liang believed that the key objective of conservation design was “to remedy as far as possible the defects in the existing architectural structure of Confucian temples, benefiting from today’s new knowledge of mechanics and new materials, while trying our best to maintain or restore the original shape and structure of the existing temple form” (Liang, 1935a).

The preceding quotations reveal notable similarities between the views on restoration of Liang and Sir George Gilbert Scott, a British ecclesiological architect. Both experts not only had a profound understanding of the value of ancient architecture and acknowledged the harm done by previous restoration efforts but also took practical steps to correct the mistakes of their predecessors. Liang’s restoration plan for the Liuhe Pagoda and Scott’s design for the restoration of the Westminster Abbey seem to have been cast in the same mold. Scott behaved extremely differently in theory and practice, while Liang expressed paradoxical ideas regarding architectural conservation. He argued that adherence to ancient styles and use of new materials and structures were within the scope of conservation, and that the restoration of original shapes and structures was an important conservation process. However, this argument contradicts his statement that “the best way to preserve ancient architecture is to retain its existing form” (Liang, 1934). Liang could be considered “modern” because he had received Eastern and Western education. The contradiction in his thoughts on architectural conservation emerged from the limitations of his own education system and philosophical ideas. Such contradictions could also be attributed to the Beaux-Arts teaching system, which emphasized the pursuit of formal beauty in architectural design. Although Liang also taught modern Japanese theories of architectural conservation, he still sought to restore ancient buildings to their original state, thereby developing the principle of renovating the old as old.

In summary, Liang’s ideas on architectural conservation were complex and reflected modern theoretical advancements and limitations of traditional history. Such ideas were similar to his paradoxical ideas on design, which received considerable attention from scholars in recent years. Liang’s ideas were advanced because he recognized the evolution of historical buildings, used scientific techniques to record and investigate historical relics, and encouraged society to participate in systematic architectural conservation. The limitations of his ideas were evident in his obsession with formal and harmonious beauty, as well as in his preference for buildings from specific historical periods. The complexity of his thought emerged from the conflict between intellectual traditions, particularly between traditional Chinese culture and Western education, and awareness of historical approaches to conservation.

## 2. Beneficial hints

The Venice Charter was introduced in China over 20 years after its publication in 1964. In 1986, Chen published the

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