

Chinese Architecture

Ancient Chinese architecture not only is a source of reference for modern Chinese design, it also has had an international influence and attracted global attention. Moreover, architectural remains in China reveal much about the history of this ancient civilisation. The palaces, gardens, temples, tombs, and dwellings of the Chinese people reflect, for example, the military achievements of the Qin emperor, the spirit of the Tang Dynasty, the palace intrigues of the Ming Dynasty, the diversity of Chinese culture through the ages, and the skill of countless generations of craftsmen and laborers. *Chinese Architecture* provides an accessible, illustrated introduction to this essential part of China's cultural heritage.

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Cai Yanxin

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Preface

The history of China's architectural development can be traced back thousands of years to ancient times when China's buildings were primarily built from wood, supplemented by brick, tile and stone. This ancient Chinese architecture not only is a source of reference for modern Chinese design; it has also attracted global attention.

Appreciating ancient Chinese architecture can be likened to opening a large history book. The legends of remote antiquity speak of the great military achievements of the Qin emperor, the noble spirit of the Tang Dynasty, the palace intrigues of the Ming Dynasty, not to mention the wisdom and intelligence of millions of ordinary laborers that are neglected by the history books. All this is recorded vividly in ancient architecture.

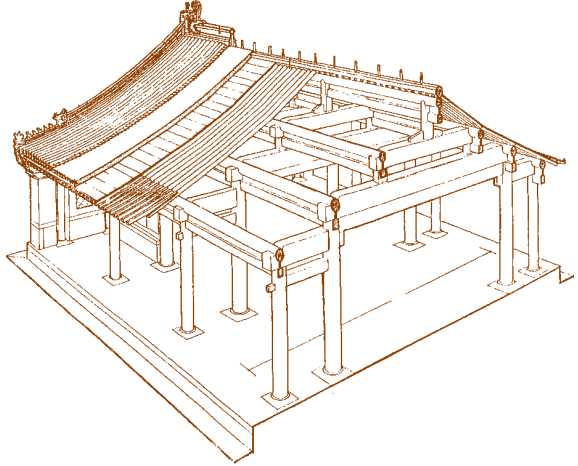
Ancient Chinese architecture includes royal palaces, temples, residential dwellings, imperial burial grounds and landscape architecture. The features of the built structures, such as palaces and temples, all tend to adopt similar architectural forms and overall patterns of layout, expressing the classic Confucian style. Landscape architecture was completely different, with free and flexible arrangements and vestiges of Taoist influence.

Each building was divided into upper, middle and lower components. The roof composed the top, the foundation the bottom, and the pillars, doors, windows and walls the middle. The roof can be considered the most important part of ancient



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Chinese architecture; all roofs had a graceful and gradual curved shape, and can be classified into many different categories, including veranda roofs, gable and hipped roofs, and pavilion roofs, with each category representing a different degree of curve.



The frame of ancient Chinese buildings was built from wood, including the columns and beams, with every component's point of connection using a tenon and mortise joint. This formed a flexible, versatile framework. Tenon and mortise joints have been discovered among architectural ruins in the city of Yuyao in Zhejiang province, indicating that they were used in antiquity as long as 7,000 years ago. Above the columns and below the roof there is a structural element built from alternating horizontal and vertical pieces of wood; these repeating layered components are called *dougong*, or bracket sets. This represents a characteristic Chinese element within Eastern architecture, and serves not only as a roof truss and fillet, but also has an attractive appearance.

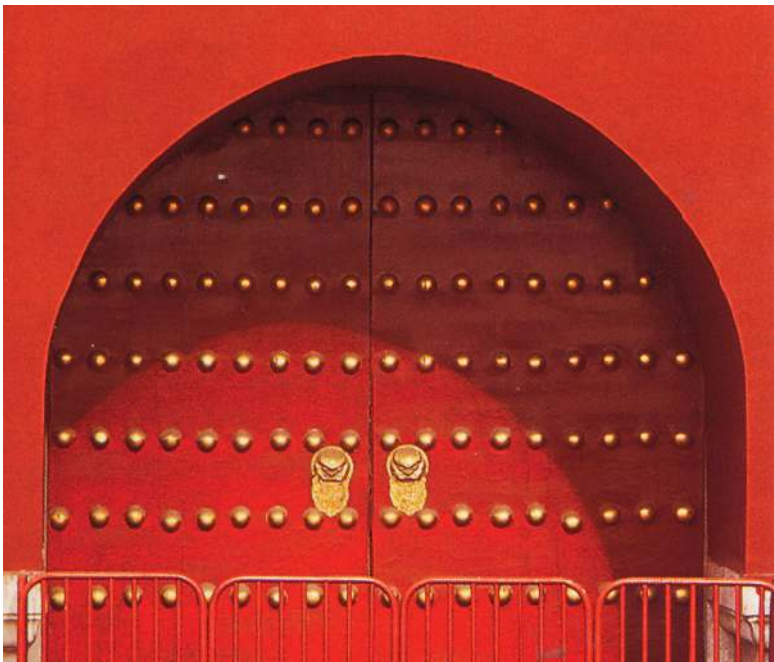
Decoration was an important means of expression in ancient Chinese architecture, and when building frames ancient Chinese craftsmen took full advantage of the malleable characteristics of wood, using knives, hammers, chisels, drills and other tools to decorate their work. Most decorative Chinese traditional architecture had a practical and aesthetic value; the decoration was closely integrated with the structure, giving expression to the materials' natural qualities. Traditional Chinese painting,



PREFACE

sculpture, calligraphy, colors, designs, patterns and other artistic methods all had applications within decorative architecture, providing the architecture with a strong power of expression beyond its practical value.

As the dominant ideology in ancient China, Confucianism adopted the concept of propriety as the basic framework of its thoughts and teachings. This framework encouraged institutionalized relationships between social classes, which came to permeate the spheres of architecture and decorative art. This meant that not only a building's aesthetic value, but also its function of showing the owner's social status, was taken into account by architects. A building's architectural style, size, decoration and theme were all determined by its social function



The gold studded red gate of the Imperial Palace, Beijing.



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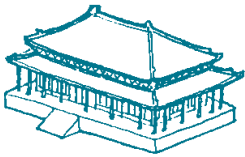
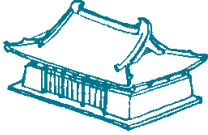
and thus became important means of demonstrating the social status of the owners.

Artistic architecture develops under certain social conditions, and therefore naturally reflects the place and time of its origin. The progression of time is reflected in the continuous reform and innovation of architectural styles, thematic content and methods of craftsmanship, and the large degree of variation between the architecture of different regions stems from their differences in environment and climate. China's many different nationalities also use their own aesthetic traditions within artistic architecture, giving birth to a rich variety of ethnic styles.

Traditional Chinese artistic architecture was created and maintained by countless craftsmen who passed their knowledge from one generation to the next. In most dynasties architecture was never an independent field of study, and a formal process of preserving architectural history never took shape. Fortunately, within literary works many references can be found to cities and their architectural themes. Although rather sparse, there are some historical documents, such as old blueprints, diaries of foremen or craftsmen involved in the construction of imperial palaces or other large architectural projects, as well as treatises disseminated by architects themselves, which allow us a brief glimpse into the ancient process of creating architecture.

The process of designing ancient Chinese architecture was very similar to the processes used in designing buildings today. Architects and designers all attach great importance to the investigation and research into contemporary and older buildings, using and synthesizing previous models in the production of their designs. For a long time, Chinese craftsmen have used a three-dimensional method in the creation of their designs, similar to modern methods, and in the later stages of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), formal architectural design patterns and explanatory documents were as indispensable for





Different forms of roof in ancient China, which represent different classes of building.

large-scale architectural plans as they are now.

For the two to three thousand years between the *Dongguan* (Imperial Ministry of Works) in the Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC–256 BC) and the Imperial Offices of Royal Building and Architecture of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), China had no specialized architectural department or official responsible for planning, construction or allocation of building materials. It was the work of these government institutions to bring about a high level

of efficiency in the utilization of labor and the transportation of production materials.

From the nineteenth century onward the world experienced the eastward spread of western culture, the scientific and technological development of modern society, and a growing interest in aesthetics. The Chinese architecture of the twentieth century was very varied and many public architectural projects appeared that successfully combined elements from China and the west. After China's reform and opening up in the 1980s, cities transformed at an ever quicker pace and developed a wealth of architectural styles. The current challenge for contemporary Chinese architects is to find a style that combines modern, organic and traditional styles.

