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***Exporting Chinese
Architecture: History, Issues
and "One Belt One Road."***
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This fascinating collection of essays, edited by Charlie Qiuli Xue and Guanghui Ding, focuses on the history and development of China's cross-border practice of designing and constructing buildings in other countries, especially in the developing world such as Africa, a topic that has been long overlooked. Drawing on the editors' historical survey of China's state-owned design institutes spanning seven decades, this volume provides a focused examination of Chinese architects' overseas work. These interdisciplinary studies, contributed by scholars and design practitioners with diverse backgrounds, reveal the dynamics and complexity of China's architectural diplomacy in the Global South. They help international communities gain a better understanding of the contexts, processes, and implications of this transnational, material, aesthetic, technological, and ideological engagement.

Transnational architectural practice is an important and visible part of our globalised world. American, British, and German architects have exported a great number of designs to other countries since the end of World War II. Some research has been done on how socialist countries left their mark on urban landscapes in the postcolonial world during the Soviet era, such as Łukasz Stanek's book *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War* (2020). However, it is often overlooked that Chinese architects and constructors have also built buildings overseas, from the early foreign-aid projects in the 1950s to the more commercial projects in the twenty-first century. Compared to research on economics and international relations on China's foreign aid, much less research has been done regarding China's exportation of architecture and urban models to the Global South. This book builds up a solid foundation to fill this enormous gap in architectural research. It is important for expanding knowledge of Chinese architecture and culture not only in the world, but also within China, since it adds a missing piece to the puzzle of understanding Chinese modern architecture.

The collection of essays introduces the motivations, design and construction process, and sociopolitical performances of China-aided buildings. It illustrates the impacts and transformative effects on urban environments and local communities of the recipient countries. By doing so, it provides a critical assessment of the architectural field and the boundaries of the architectural discipline on different levels of this transnational architectural practice.

To address the above questions, the book is structured into three parts. Part One traces the history of Chinese construction exportation from the Mao era to the present. It introduces the background and motivations of China's construction aid, and identifies the style, type, and geographical dimensions of the foundational period (Chapters One and Two). Chinese modernism in architecture is demonstrated in case studies (Chapter Three). It raises the question of how to construct a culturally sensitive understanding of architecture to form new political and cultural identities (Chapter Five). Part Two introduces various important types of aided projects, including medical, administrative, and educational buildings (Chapters Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine). Part Three specifically discusses the ongoing "one belt, one road" initiative proposed in 2013, following the business trajectories of both state-owned and private design and construction companies. Compared to the first two parts, the third part is a little disappointing. The overall picture of current development of exported architecture under the "one belt, one road" initiative remains unclear. This is perhaps a consequence of the specific individual case study format adopted in this part.

When digging deep enough into this field, more layers of information are revealed in the book. One theme that comes through strongly is the multilayered architectural scenes that existed in those postcolonial worlds. The book underlines the specificity of a context built upon Western colonial heritage and local conditions, thus reminding the reader that the regional architecture in these recipient countries is more complex than only vernacular building. Therefore, besides local natural and geographical conditions, Chinese architects also have to cope with the Western architectural heritage from colonisation. The appropriation and synthesis of architectural ideas from various contexts create new challenges for them. However, the multiple international architectural influences also provide another lens for Chinese architects to study both Western-style inherited buildings and local architecture. The book provides in-depth cases to review the details and various scenarios of this complex process.

Another intriguing idea suggested by the book is that exported Chinese architecture is part of unexplored modern Chinese architecture, which is also a social and political consequence of the postwar period. Since Western influence was not openly discussed in China due to the ideological confrontation between China and the West in the Cold War context, the novel style of modern architecture and new architectural approaches were banned in socialist China's domestic environment. However, Chinese architects found an outside experimental field in these receiving countries. One experiment discussed most in the book is the test of the relationship between Chineseness and modernism. The balance between the expression of Chinese identity, modernist aesthetics and technology, and the local traditional dwellings of receiving countries was tested in different cases. Besides architectural formal considerations, the downplaying of Chinese identity is sometimes due to political requirements.

However, this focus of formal expression on modernism is criticised by authors from the recipient countries. For example, in Chapter Four, Amoah, a senior lecturer from the Department of Political Science at the University of Ghana, argues that the focus on modernism should be neither overplayed nor simplified to mask the problematic political-economy dynamics. He instead criticises China as a powerful player manipulating developing countries, and calls for the local community to be more involved in the aid process. China-aided buildings construct delicate diplomatic relations between China and the recipient countries. The initial “equal and mutual benefit” principles, which were issued by Premier Zhou Enlai in the 1960s to provide aid in a more equal and friendly manner compared to “unequal” foreign aid agreements imposed by the superpowers, become controversial due to the asymmetric power relationship resulting from China’s rapid rise.

The book also demonstrates the social consequences of how these aid projects continue to serve the local residents. For example, aided educational buildings provide more educational opportunities for youngsters. Medical projects have not only improved regional medical facilities and services, but have also promoted medical-related industries and development in surrounding areas. However, the authors of Chapter Nine argue that the turnkey mode lacks local participation, which can lead to China monopolising large projects. Similar to the Western approach in international cooperation, this Chinese approach is also criticised as an imposition of economic dependence through the exercise of soft power.

As the book brings together a collection of separate writings, there is some repetition of concepts and arguments. But overall, this book provides a comprehensive historical reference on exported Chinese architecture, including related issues such as international and political influence, economic exchange, and cultural engagement. This is an intellectual heritage and reference for the new challenges ahead in the ongoing “one belt, one road” initiative, making the book accessible and engaging to a wide nonarchitectural audience as it usefully introduces the architectural piece of “made in China.”

References

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Continent in Dust:
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Princeton anthropologist Jerry Zee has published a groundbreaking book on the management of dust storm and air quality in China. Borrowing from innovative works in the anthropology of globalisation and environmental humanities (Hugh Raffles, Anna Tsing), Zee follows scientists and engineers with the method of science and technology studies, avoiding the opposition between subject and object, to ask: what kind of being is a “continent in dust”? Resisting the tropes of the “Yellow Peril,” which depicts China as an environmental threat, he shows that in the monitoring and modelling practices implemented by these scientists and engineers, a new form emerges that doubles the earth of China by the atmosphere of China, as a series of dust storms troubling air quality in China and beyond. This double entity, which he calls a weather system, goes beyond the opposition between earth and sky, or between geology and meteorology, to become a new entity at stake in global environmental debates. Zee’s book is an enduring meditation on the consequences of China’s modernisation, which avoids the nostalgic return to a preserved soil or community and stresses the experimental potentials of a socialist management of the environment from China to the rest of the world.

Asking “what if the rise of China were to be approached literally, through the rise of China into the air?” (p. 7-9) allows Zee to analyse what the weather system is in and for China. Borrowing from anthropologists Tim Choy, Michael Hathaway, and Lisa Rofel, who stress the nondeterministic openness of the mix of neoliberal policies and socialist discourses in contemporary China, Zee raises the debate to the scale of “Asia as a laboratory of possible planets” (p. 14). He convincingly pleads for an anthropology of the “Sinocene” which, following debates on the “Anthropocene” and the “Capitalocene,” starts from the fact that modern China is a major source of environmental damage but also has the ambition to manage it with its own conceptual tools (p. 207). From the discourse of Sun Yat-sen criticising the Chinese population as “a sheet of loose sand” (p. 74) to the performance of Xi Jinping coming out to breathe the unclean air of Beijing in 2014, the idea of China as a weather system has several declinations.