

# Historical Materialism and Liu Dunzhen's *Ancient Chinese Architecture History*

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## Abstract

After the founding of new China, Marxist Historical Materialism has achieved dominant position in China. Although it had been the dogmatism tendency of “simplification”, “formulation” and “politicization”, Chinese Historical Materialism research reached a new height and state in the 1950-1960s. Liu Dunzhen's works—*Ancient Chinese Architecture History*, which has been inoculation, mature and birth of in a turbulent of historical background, inevitably, the historical materialism and its core ideology have had a complex and profound influence on it. From the angle of text study, this article tries to show how deep the academic penetrability in Ancient Chinese Architecture History on the specific historical environment of that time and the great contribution of narrative paradigm and academic discourse system.

## Keywords

Liu Dunzhen, *Ancient Chinese Architecture History*, Historical Materialism, Ideology, Text Study

## 1. Text Study and Symptomatic Reading

Hanno-Walter Kruft, a famous German architectural theorist, put forward two synonyms concepts in his works—*A History of Architectural Theory. From Vitruvius to the Present*. For one hand, the architectural theory and the theory of text is a synonym; for the other hand, architectural theory and architectural history is another synonym. In Kruft's (2005: pp. 23-27) point of view, “architectural history”, “architectural theory” and “text on architectural theory” these three has relevance among. He also pointed out that the judgments between architectural theory and architectural history should be based on historical comparison but not on ideology. At the same time, he admitted without denying, although study on architectural theory and architectural history is confined to text

reserved by accidental factors and our understandings, historians cannot rely those written recordings.

Louis Althusser, a French Marxism theorist, proposed the concept “symptomatic reading” in *Reading Capital*, who argued that “symptomatic reading” could reveal the uncovered (Althusser, 2008: p. 18). Some parts of the Marxist historical theory of vitality perhaps lies in the various methods in his statement without appearing, but the existence of the basic concept of his own thoughts. Therefore, in *For Marx*, Althusser stated that direct reading Marx’s works could not get the hang of Marxism’s distinctiveness. Nevertheless, historical, temporary and basic Marxism concepts are the precondition for explaining Marx’s works. Before reading the Marx, one must make preparation for critical thinking and orientate properly for Marx’s works in mature time (Althusser, 2006: pp. 21-22).

Kruft and Althusser opened a new door for text study. Text study on architectural history synthesizes historical text, theoretical base, ideology and reality context, so that the mist and deep meaning can be uncovered. In the perspective of Marxist historical materialism, rereading Liu’s *Ancient Chinese Architecture History* (hereafter referred to as *The History*) tries to show how deep the academic penetrability in *The History* on the specific historical environment of that time and the great contribution of narrative paradigm and academic discourse system.

## **2. Marxist Historical Materialism and the Rule of Development & Force in Ancient Chinese Architecture**

The core of Marxist historical materialism stresses on rule of the social and historical development (Chen, 2010: p. 340). Liu, editing his works, paid special attention to the development, evolution process and rule of Chinese architecture, who contended that uncovering the evolution process general rule of Chinese architecture should be guided by Marxist historical materialism. In a Preface for *Ancient Chinese Architecture History Manuscript*, Professor Liu argued that editing this book was based on Marxism-Leninism, so as to analyze, evaluate and summarize our ancient building heritage, furthermore, to give a systematic explanation for the development and evolution process of Chinese architecture. In *Ancient Chinese Architecture History Manuscript*, he addressed that it is under the guideline of dialectical materialism and historical materialism to summarize the development and rule of Chinese architecture in every historical periods; however, there are still some shortcomings in that too much emphasis is put on narration rather than explanation for its changes (Liu, 1984: p. 1).

Historical materialism is seen everywhere and without doubt that it is the solid theoretical base and distinct ideological standpoint in *The History*. Judged from the letters between Liu and his friends, emphasis and stress on historical materialism to guide architecture history study can be further illustrated. *A letter to Yu Guowei and Zhang Yaqing* (Liu, 2007a: p. 205) in May, 1963, Liu believed

that there were many ways to record architecture history, i.e. either in a simple or detailed way; or in a comprehensive or special way. Orthodox architecture history should be comprehensive and of the dynasties, nevertheless, it is of more value to illustrate its development rule in the perspective of historical materialism and enrich its historical & artistic value. If not, I didn't think it could meet any teaching requirements. *A letter to Lu Yuanding and Ma Xiuzhi* (Liu, 2007a: p. 209) in February, 1966, Liu stressed that recoding architecture history without mentioning its development rule was equal to drawing a dragon without eyes. It is a must to illustrate Chinese architecture development rule combined with the specific social development to explain its sociality, class nature, nationality and the People nature, to explain the role between architecture & economy as well as architecture development force—the People, and to discuss the relationship between inheritance and renovation. Seen above, Liu had completely put his Chinese architecture study under the framework of historical materialism.

Under such social background of 1950-1960s, Chair Mao believed “class struggle” was the force for social development, which greatly influenced Liu's study. The point that class struggle and the People is the pusher of social development gradually became one of his theoretical bases for architecture development pusher. In Wang's paper (Wang, 2007: p. 8). *On the Implication and Understanding of Liu Dunzhen's Posthumous Manuscript—The Influence of Chinese Feudal System to Ancient Architecture* (written in July, 1964 but later omitted in 1980), he pointed out that Chinese ancient architecture developed and matured in the feudal society, deeply confined by productive forces, productive relationships and class struggle as well as ideology with a distinct social features and impacts. In Liu's point of view (Liu, 2007b: pp. 9-10), it is the key to write *The History* correctly before having a correct understanding of architecture development rules and forces, which could be testified by letters for his colleagues.

*A letter to Wang Jiqi* (Liu, 2007a: p. 99) in April 22, 1964, Liu contended that *The History* is a history, so we must take a distinctive class standpoint and a critical standpoint to inheritance. *A letter to Wang Jiqi* (Liu, 2007a: p. 100) in April 23, 1964, Liu once more put forward “class nature” concerning ways to express architecture history. For example, the construction, material and decoration of ancient palace are a good illustration for architecture rank system. The private gardens represent leisure and self adaptation for the literati and officialdom. Taking WEI Xian's painting *Hermit Portrait* as an example, unworldliness of the hermit in nature is a kind of decadent exploitation of life. For Liu, writing architecture history, without doubt, is surely bound to stress on class nature, however the problem is how to keep balance between mild and sharp expression ways. Though having made revisions, he still believed class struggle was not obvious in the *letters to Liu Zhenxiang & Wang Jiqi* in June 5 (Liu, 2007a: p. 115), and *Fu Xinian* (Liu, 2007a: p. 118) in June 8, 1964 respectively.

*A letter to Wang Jiqi* (Liu, 2007a: p. 122) in June 23, 1964, Liu finally affirmed

his new way of expressing class nature in his works adopting simplification in the introduction and narration & argumentation in each chapter. Liu preferred this way but he still concerned how to express properly and balance explicitation & simplification. *A letter to Wang Shiren and Fu Xinian* (Liu, 2007a: p. 170) in October 21, 1964, Liu mentioned that, though *The History* having been revised eight times, I haven't found a proper way to illustrate the class struggle and had to leave alone for a while. Obviously, Liu's thinking about the class nature and class struggle is nearly seen in *The History*. During his long-time thinking and study, Liu successfully created a new way in which explicitation & simplification could be well balanced.

Of course, despite that Liu suffered a lot of obstacles and confusions; he had met the challenges and triumphed. It already had taken Liu five years till now. *A letter to Wang Shiren and Fu Xinian* (Liu, 2007a: p. 178) in October 6, 1964, taking an example of Fan Wenlan's Chinese General History, he admitted that writing architecture was a difficult task except for its class nature and historicity, including material, structure, artistry and so on, which made it more difficult. After all, China was in great need of a Chinese architecture history. Under such circumstances, we had to feel our way and embrace all challenges.

### **3. Marxist Historical Materialism Developmental Stages Theory and Ancient Chinese Architecture History Dividing Periods**

According to Marxist historical materialism, productive forces determine productive relationships, so do economic base & superstructure and social existence & social consciousness. Social formation develops from primary to advanced level. During 1950s-1960s, with the former "Soviet Union historiography mode" expansion, it helped broaden the horizon of Chinese historians, which made Marxist historical materialism a dominant position in our historiography circle; however, it severely damaged historiography development due to dogmatism. In 1938, with the coming out of *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)*, Short Course (1975: p. 116), on the relationship between dialectical materialism and historical materialism it put such remark that historical materialism extend dialectical materialism into social life, social phenomenon and social history. *A letter to Guo Husheng* (Liu, 2007a: p. 202) in December 1953, Liu put forward a study order "historical materialism → Chinese general history → Chinese architecture history", which was deeply influenced by *Soviet Union Short Course*.

I do hope that you should have a grasp of historical materialism and then study Chinese general history. Only having knowledge of Chinese social development, can you truly understand how Chinese architecture produce and develop. I strongly recommend Fan's *Chinese General History*. You have to study the architecture such as architecture structure, decoration and so on in the perspective of historical materialism (Liu, 2007a: p. 202).

*History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks), Short Course* (1975: p. 137) put forward five types of production modes, they are: primitive society, slave society, feudal society and capitalist society as well as socialist society. This theory had a profound influence on Chinese historiography circle and stirred a hot debate on the division between slave society and feudal society among scholars during 1950s-1960s. There were three different kinds of ideas on division between slave society and feudal society, such as Fan Wenlan and Jian Bozan's Western Zhou Dynasty of feudal society, Guo Moruo's Warring States of feudal society and Zhou Gucheng's Eastern Han Dynasty of feudal society, among which of Guo's idea was adopted by Chinese historiography circle and gained an increasing support. In the Preface of *The History*, Liu pointed out, though being divergence on historical division; I preferred Guo's division taking Spring & Autumn-Warring States Period as beginning of feudal society, which set a framework for *The History*.

*The History Manuscript* is arranged under the framework of primitive society's architecture, slave society's architecture, and early days of feudal society's architecture as well as late feudal society's architecture. The feudal society is divided into four periods: Warring States Period to Eastern Han Dynasty, Three Kingdoms Period to Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui Dynasty to Yuan Dynasty, and Ming Dynasty to Opium War Period. He also mentioned that our edition was basically according to social history development. Since that architecture history development is the same as social history development and closely related, it is a must to combine with social development, otherwise, architecture history is unilateral and isolated, which can reveal the nature of architecture development. During the four feudal society periods, though the nature of society hadn't changed, the productive forces and relationships had changed more or less due to farmer rebellions, which gave a heavy strike to feudal rule, therefore, the economic base and technology in each period was not quite the same so was the architecture. Liu seemed to doubt whether this division was a hypothesis, which need to be testified by continuing study and a handful of historical facts. Even so, Liu held a clear idea that architecture is one of the social consciousness formations, that is to say, architecture being one of the social consciousness formations is confined to the rule of social development, which can be seen as a profound significance of historical materialism on Liu's architecture history viewpoint.

Compared with *The History Manuscript* in 1959 and *The History* in 1980, it can be found that the former is strictly faithful to the social development historical divisions: "primitive society → slave society → feudal society", sinking into the formulation pattern. The latter, in spite of the same order, it divides slave society architecture into that of Xia, Shang, Western Zhou and Spring & Autumn Periods; feudal society architecture into five periods, they are: one, Warring States Periods-Qin Dynasty-Western & Eastern Han Dynasties-Three Kingdoms Periods' architecture; two, Eastern & Western Jin Dynasties-Southern & North-

ern Dynasties' architecture; three, Sui Dynasty-Tang Dynasty—Five Dynasties' architecture; four, Song Dynasty-Liao Dynasty-Jin Dynasty's architecture; five, Yuan Dynasty-Ming Dynasty-Qing Dynasty's architecture. The 1980 edition realized the difference between architecture history developmental stages and social developmental stages and rectified the dogmatism formulation tendency. As for the Chinese architecture writing, it is much more accurate to illustrate the relationship between social changes and architecture development based on dynasty division. Even so, Liu's *The History* bears significant difference from LIANG Sicheng's *Chinese Architecture History* in aspect of history viewpoint, which can be found evidence from Liu's criticism on the paper *The Historical Stages of Chinese Architecture Development* of Liang et al:

It is well known that there were several epoch-marking significant changes during the human society development. Those changes are by no means determined by human will but the contradiction between productive force and productive relationship using various ways of class struggle to settle. The paper *The Historical Stages of Chinese Architecture Development* mistook the origin of Chinese feudal system as the obscurantist policy of King Zhouwen grandfather's, which is against the rule of social development and it is harmful to fuzz people's opinion about class struggle (Liu, 1955: pp. 69-79).

Liu particularly pointed out that Liang's opinion on Chinese feudal system origin was against the social development rule and that he failed to make organic connection of Chinese architecture and Chinese social development, manifesting the relationships between architecture and economy, politics and culture, especially economy, which helped to cultivate the materialism architecture viewpoint and pave new way for development (Liu, 1955: pp. 69-79). Liu, with a strong stand of materialism architecture viewpoint, was devoted himself to the writing of *The History* making organic connection of economy, politics and culture, which made *The History* achieve a totally new level.

#### **4. Research Methodology: Combination of Macro-Study of Marxist Historical Materialism and Micro-Analysis of New Historical Textual Study**

At the early beginning of 20 century, Liang Qichao initiated a "historiography circle revolution". In 1902, Liang published the paper—*New Historiography*, which promoted the birth and development of new historiography. Generally speaking, the early beginning of 20 century saw the spring up of it, May Fourth Movement Period mature, and 1930s to 1940s reach a peak (Liu, 2012c: pp. 76-83). In 1924, Li (2011: pp. 4-5) published *Key Points to Historiography*, considered as a theoretical keystone of Marxism historiography in China. It had been the first time for Li to systematically interpret Marxism historical materialism and he was thought to be the pioneer of Marxism historiography in China. The evolution viewpoint of new historiography surpassed that of periodic and downfallen old historiography, having some commonality with Marxism histo-

riography to some extent. The new historiography emphasized that evolution theory was the way to explore the cause-effect of historical evolution, in lack of Marxism historical materialism. Thanks to his knowledge of Chinese and western historiography, Wang Guowei, taking Qian-Jia Period of traditional historical textual study as a base, proposed western empirical research, becoming the pioneer for the “new historical textual study” (Jian, 2011: pp. 102-103), which had a great impact on Chinese historiography. As Guo (1982) put it, what Wang Guowei left behind was a great treasure and shone brightly. Compared with Wang’s combination of historical recordings and archeological evidences research method, Li (2011: pp. 4-5) argued that archeological evidences, except those dead data such as recordings, classics, lists and files, should be used as a living history, seeking for real history. By the first half of 20 century, Marxism historiography, new historiography and new historical textual study constituted of three historical trends, co-existed harmoniously, which promoted the development of the prosperity of Chinese historiography. After the foundation of new China, Marxism historiography gained an overwhelming success with an increasing numbers of scholars’ acceptance of this theory. Although there were left dogmatism tendencies of “simplification, formulation and politicization”, on a whole, Chinese historiography study reached a higher level in the 1950s-1960s, when Liu’s *The History* was born in such turbulent times. Inevitably, Marxism historiography, new historiography and new historical textual study had a profound impact on *The History*.

Since 1932, Liu left Nanjing National Central University for Beijing Society for the Study of Chinese Architecture, and devoted himself to ancient architecture study, following a series of academic achievements such as *On the Origin and Evolution of Yinzaofashi (The Rules of Architecture) Versions*, *On Editing and Proofreading A Copy of Ming Dynasty Luban Yingzaofashi*, published in *Journal for the Study of Chinese Architecture* in the year of 1933 and 1936 respectively. Liu’s study method during this period was affected by historical textual study of Qianjia period (1736-1820). Chen (2008b: pp. 85-90) spoke highly of Liu’s research methodology combining literature textual research study with archaeology, surveying & mapping, and inscription, and that he opened a new chapter for ancient Chinese architecture study methodology. Since he began to write *The History* in 1959, Liu creatively combined macro-study of Marxist historical materialism and micro-analysis of new historical textual study method, opening a new era for ancient Chinese architecture history.

In 1955, Liu had already expressed his idea of the new research method in the paper *On Criticism of Liang Sicheng’s Idealism*, and pointed out that Liang failed to combine the micro-analysis of architecture patterns & literature with macro-study of social changes leading to his misjudgments.

Liang’s judgment of the year of ancient architecture monument was not based on a comprehensive study of patterns, literature recordings, social changes and the architecture evolution, but merely on structure especially the standard of the

size of dougong (backet aches) and shape of juansha (entasis), which led to his earlier judgment of the year it built (Liu, 1955: pp. 69-79).

When he wrote *The History*, Liu had fully mastered this method. For example, he made a comprehensive and systematic discussion on *Yingzao Fashi*, with a summary of five features: the design and application of modulus; flexibility; summary of technology experience; unity of decoration & structure; and tightness of building management. *Yingzao Fashi*, with 357 chapters, 3555 articles as a whole, of which 308 chapters and 3272 articles were passed on generation by generation by artisans, proved to be feasible. Liu stressed that *Yingzao Fashi* provided valuable data to study the architecture of Song Dynasty even ancient Chinese architecture development and that it's a treasurable literature to architecture heritage. According to Chen's (2008a) study, 158 times of classics, 30 times of academic achievements from *Journal for the Study of Chinese Architecture*, 107 times of journals and monologues for cultural relics & archaeology were quoted in *The History*, which shows his emphasis on textual research and remarkable skills in literature research. More importantly, Liu wasn't satisfied with his achievement and textual research in *Yingzao Fashi*. From the perspective of historical materialism, he stated that the background for *Yingzao Fashi* was based on the late Song Dynasty, when political corruption, lavished lifestyles and the ruling class pursuit for luxurious construction were overwhelmed the society. Under such circumstances, the contradiction between great difficulty in human, financial and material resources and the ruling class pursuit for luxurious construction, writing *Yingzao Fashi* was not only to save energy, and guarantee the quality of design, material and construction, but also meet the demand of the ruling class but more for save the ruling class (Liu, 1984: p. 1). Liu consciously applied historical materialism theory to discuss the development rules and forces of Chinese architecture and closely related architecture history with society, politics and economy with productive forces, productive relationships and technology.

## **5. Historical Materialism and Chinese Architecture History: Liu Left behind a Rich Treasure**

As Lai (2009: pp. 257-259) pointed out, Liu, in the perspective of social development theory, altered Chinese architecture study from Liang's paradigm focusing on structure-pattern and style into a new paradigm on the force of architecture development, that is, discussion on the relationship between Chinese architecture and nature & society, which has greatly pushed the Chinese architecture history research in depth and breadth by means of editing *The History*. Zhu (2009: pp. 6-7) argued that Liu's *The History* was a remarkable architecture history symphony and a milestone in architecture academic history. Liu's rich academic and spiritual inheritance, like a great treasure, waits to be explored. What confronts us is that it is a difficult and glorious task to manifest his value in the new era, highlight its long vitality to adapt itself to the new theoretical frame-

work, and promote the narrative paradigm and academic discourse system with Chinese character both in theory and in practice. A hint given by Liu's works is that it is the solid foundation and only right path for us to study Chinese architecture historiography in perspective of historical materialism and thus gain discourse in world architecture historiography. It is of great value for us to calculate a sense of theoretical conscientious and confidence.

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