

Introduction

ON JANUARY 8, 1976, Premier Zhou Enlai of the People's Republic of China (PRC) died in the Beijing Hospital near historic East Chang'an Avenue.¹ On the morning of January 11, Zhou's body, in a white hearse followed by a hundred-car motorcade, was driven from the hospital to Babaoshan Crematorium near the terminus of West Chang'an Avenue. A million people lined Chang'an Avenue proper as Zhou's hearse passed by, paying final farewell to the premier.² That evening, Zhou's ashes were escorted back along the same route and placed in the Cultural Palace of the Working People, the former Imperial Ancestral Temple of the Ming and Qing dynasties on the north side of historic East Chang'an Avenue. Silent and respectful crowds, stretching more than twenty kilometers on either side of the avenue between Babaoshan and the Cultural Palace of the Working People, observed the return of Zhou's ashes. Thousands of people stood in chilly fog for hours along the section of the avenue near Tiananmen Square. For the next three days, Zhou's ashes were displayed in the main hall of the temple, where hundreds of thousands of people paid their last respects. Toward the evening of January 14, escorted again by a procession of one hundred vehicles, Zhou's ashes were borne along and then across the avenue to the Great Hall of the People, the largest and most important of the Ten Great Buildings constructed for the tenth anniversary of the People's Republic of China in 1959. There, public homage continued. An official memorial service was held on January 16, and after that, the ashes were moved once more along Chang'an Avenue to the Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery.³

Three months later, on the eve of the Qingming Festival, a traditional Chinese memorial day for paying homage to deceased ancestors, thousands of people gathered spontaneously around the Monument to the People's Heroes in Tiananmen Square to the south of Chang'an Avenue to pay homage once again to the deceased premier. They brought wreaths and banners and turned the monument into an unauthorized memorial for Zhou and a beachhead for criticism of those currently in power. The next morning, after discovering that their tributes had been removed by the police, people began protesting in the square and along the avenue. The confron-

tation between hundreds of thousands of citizens and the police lasted for hours, and those who refused to leave the square after an official warning were arrested by security forces.⁴ This event was repeated more traumatically and on a larger scale thirteen years later, in the spring of 1989, following the death of the deposed Chinese Communist Party (CCP) general secretary Hu Yaobang.

Chang'an Avenue once again became a site for national political events in the autumn of 1976 when Mao Zedong's death was quickly followed by the fall of the radical cultural revolutionary leadership faction known as the Gang of Four. On October 24 the avenue became a river of red flags. In a carefully orchestrated event, a million people gathered in Tiananmen Square and paraded along the avenue, celebrating the downfall of the Gang of Four and the victory of Hua Guofeng, who became at the same time chairman of the CCP Central Committee, premier of the State Council, and chairman of the Central Military Commission.⁵ On the rostrum of Tiananmen Tower, Hua and other leaders of the nation and the Communist Party gazed down, waving and smiling. As the leaders on the rostrum and the masses in the square stood and watched, an endless succession of marchers and performers paraded past, in an effort to demonstrate the diversity and unity of the country, as well as its glorious past and bright future. Yet again, the dynamic stage for the celebration was Chang'an Avenue.

What happened along Chang'an Avenue in 1976 was just one link in a long chain of celebrations, confrontations, and mourning activities along this twentieth-century thoroughfare in Beijing. Carefully orchestrated state rituals punctuated by spontaneous, emotional popular eruptions have characterized the cultural and political history of the avenue. The urban and architectural spaces along Chang'an Avenue not only offered stages for these important cultural and political events but also became one of the defining factors of modern Chinese history.

A Symbol of the Chinese Modernization Process

Chang'an Avenue is an urban thoroughfare sandwiched between an imperial Forbidden City and a Communist Tiananmen Square. Its development from the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911) to the end of the twentieth century contributed to the most dramatic urban change in modern Beijing. As the most significant urban space in twentieth-century China, and the new east-west axis of the Chinese capital, Chang'an Avenue is ideal for exploring the process of the modernization of Chinese architecture through the analysis of changes in architectural styles, shifts in art ideology, organizational approaches to artistic creation, the mechanism of political interference, and the impact of globalization. As with the avenue, Chinese architectural modernization was framed in a way that could never be fully achieved. In the discourse of

modern Chinese architecture, the very definition of “modernity” changed constantly, following the latest trends in contemporary world architecture. Similarly, each period claimed to “basically complete” the avenue according to its own ideal of modernization, yet each such “completion” left new “gaps,” physical as well as symbolic, for future “completions” to fill. Chang’an Avenue thus became a symbol of this unachievable modernization.

Scholars such as Joseph Esherick and Clifford Geertz have pointed out that, for Asian and African nations, the imperial powers of the West have been both the definer of “modernity”—the mark of progress—and the target to struggle against for their place in the world.⁶ This, however, does not mean that the traffic of modernity was one-way. What the Chinese perceived of as “modern” was highly selective, and modernity in the West was far from uniform. The Chinese version of architectural modernity is a way to form a historical continuity, in spite of seemingly abrupt changes in architectural technology, forms, and ideology. Unlike discourses on Western architecture, in which “modern” could be used in the past tense, in the discourse of twentieth-century Chinese architecture, “modern” was almost always used in a future tense. The Chinese almost exclusively use “modernization” (*xiandaihua*) instead of “modern” (*xiandai*) when discussing the present issue of how to deal with “tradition.”

Two fundamental facts make Chang’an Avenue a perfect symbol for the Chinese modernization process. First, a unified Chang’an Avenue was born right after the fall of the millennia-long imperial order. Second, its growth and expansion into the east-west axis of the Chinese capital was driven by functional desire. The symbol of political power in twentieth-century China is Tiananmen Square, which Chang’an Avenue serves, both symbolically and literally. To allow more people into Tiananmen Square for public celebrations, the avenue was widened; to create a better link between the heart and the outskirts of the city, the avenue was extended; and to facilitate the organization of mass parades that would be visible to the political leaders on the Tiananmen rostrum, the intersections along the avenue were carefully planned. In this sense, Tiananmen Square is the master, the highlight, the positive, the yang; Chang’an Avenue is the servant, the background, the negative, the yin.

In daily life and during public celebrations, however, Chang’an Avenue is a space for movement, while Tiananmen Square is static. Armies and mass contingents march in formation along Chang’an Avenue on National Day, while crowds standing in Tiananmen Square form background patterns with colorful banners. In this sense, the avenue is the main stage, the active, the positive, the yang; the square becomes the backdrop, the static, the negative, the yin. In later developments, Chang’an Avenue overshadowed not only the square but also the imperial north-south axis on which the square is located. For more than half a millennium, the north-south axis along the

Forbidden City dominated the city and separated the avenue into two disconnected halves; after the revolution, Chang'an Avenue cut through the imperial north-south axis at its heart. To the north was the historic Imperial City and Forbidden City; to the south, the Communist Tiananmen Square was constructed.

Modernism, especially in its avant-garde form that is hostile to tradition,⁷ cultivated a sense of historical awareness and legitimized its historicity on the basis of chronic uniqueness. On one hand, the present should be different from the past; on the other, the future should be different from the present. The present was singled out by the cult of the “new.”⁸ Modernity is the center, extending in both directions, into past and future. At the intersection of modernity and tradition, and extending into infinity in both directions, Chang'an Avenue was a perfect metaphor for this linear characterization of the chronology of modernity. While modernity sliced through the ideological boundary between past and present, Chang'an Avenue did this physically.

There are other definitions of modernity in architecture, both formal and value based.⁹ What makes modernity a specific historical phenomenon, however, is the awareness of one's historicity. Modernity creates a boundary between past and present. Being modern is not a natural chronological extension of the past, but a self-conscious breaking away from it. The past is comprehensively defined as “tradition.” Both the modern and the traditional are products of modernity. In the discourse of twentieth-century Chinese architecture, “modern” was also discussed as a contrast to “national.” A satisfying architectural product should be a balance of both “national” and “modern.” While “national” (*minzude*) was a positive term and belonged to the present, “traditional” (*chuantongde*) was a neutral term and belonged to the past. As Mao once stated, essence and dross existed in both Chinese and foreign traditions.¹⁰ The difference between “national” and “traditional,” however, was never really defined. By confronting both, Chinese modernity imperceptibly blurred the boundary it had previously created between past and present.

An Independent Unit for Academic Inquiry

Arguably the most famous boulevard in China, known as the “Number One Avenue in the Divine Land,”¹¹ Chang'an Avenue deserves an academic inquiry in its own right. It has expanded both in length and width since the collapse of the Qing Empire, and became the new east-west axis of the socialist capital by the end of the twentieth century. The avenue, together with Tiananmen Square, its most renowned portion, is the largest public space for political ceremonies in China and the place where many of the most important historical events of postimperial China (1912–present) were

staged. During the Republican era (1912–49), Chang’an Avenue was the main theater for political protests against those in power.¹² During the PRC era (1949–present), however, it mainly became the stage on which the Communist authorities displayed power and propagated new national mythologies, especially during PRC anniversary celebrations on October 1.¹³

Chang’an Avenue, lined with a continuously expanding series of government buildings and projects of major political significance, was also the primary national showcase of socialist achievements after 1949. Since most national ceremonies during the PRC era were staged along this thoroughfare, the façades of the avenue became the architectural images most closely associated with the way China was perceived abroad and the way the “motherland” was thought of by different ethnic groups in China. As a result, Chang’an Avenue became a prototype for urban planning and a catalyst for the transformation of major Chinese cities. The development of the avenue into a new east-west axis for the Chinese capital provided a model, a revolutionary gesture in urban planning, a breaking away from the identity of the imperial periods. Other Chinese cities followed Beijing, developing main avenues for public ceremonies that cut through historic urban centers and lined up central squares and major monuments.

As the nation’s most important public space, both practically and symbolically, Chang’an Avenue was endowed with political significance, received paramount attention from the Chinese architectural profession, and became a prototype that influenced architecture and urban planning in cities throughout China. In the economic sphere, locations closer to the avenue are more privileged than other spots on the same longitude. Many real estate companies include a map of their properties in their advertisements, using Chang’an Avenue as a reference point. Being in the vicinity of the avenue is a major advantage in the current real estate market.

As a unit for academic inquiry, Chang’an Avenue offers a link between urban study and architectural history. While the discipline of urban history studies entire cities, architectural history studies individual buildings. The former largely focuses on the evolution of the macroscopic structure of a city, and, as a result, elicits only a blurred picture of the particular details of how urban fabrics change. In contrast, the latter, with its focus mainly on separate structures, achieves only a fragmentary understanding of how these contribute to overall change in urban space.

In an effort to overcome this dilemma, scholarly attention was recently given to the street as a link between the macroscopic history of a city and the microscopic history of individual buildings. Some of the issues raised in these studies are directly relevant to Chang’an Avenue in twentieth-century China, for instance, Spiro Kostof’s analysis of the Haussmannian or Mussolinic “aesthetics of demolition” and the asso-

ciation of “urban conservation” with nationalism,¹⁴ Greg Castillo’s discussion of socialist realist aesthetics as reflected in the reconstruction of Moscow’s Gorki Street in the 1930s,¹⁵ and Zeynep Celik’s treatment of the street as a space for ritual and ideological engagement.¹⁶ Limited in their length and detail, these articles on urban streets are confined to the change of large-scale urban fabric and lack specific discussions of individual structures.

This book, on the other hand, is solely dedicated to Chang’an Avenue, the only thoroughfare in Beijing that runs through the entire city, and whose development has contributed most to the urban transformation of the Chinese capital in the twentieth century. The avenue also offers the largest and most concentrated collection of significant architectural projects in the People’s Republic of China. Examining changes in the urban fabric more closely and selecting some monuments as highlights for in-depth discussion will reveal how the construction of individual buildings contributes to the bigger picture. The approach here lies between the traditional disciplines of urban history and architectural history. By focusing on Chang’an Avenue, a thoroughfare of monuments connecting different parts of a city, this study aims to construct a “tectonic joint” for these two disciplines and to promote better understanding in both fields.

The Chang’an Avenue case also provides an opportunity to create a link between cultural history and architectural history. The study of Beijing has been focused on two approaches. One emphasizes the cultural and political significance of urban space and the evolution of architectural symbolism; the other emphasizes specific professional strategies or methods in the urban development of the capital city. The former treats architecture and urbanism as part of cultural and political history; the latter treats the city and its built environment mainly as a design problem and as the history of various solutions that have been offered. The debates surrounding every significant national monument on Chang’an Avenue make it a perfect candidate for a cultural study of architecture. Historical contextualization in the study of specific objects will be a useful tool in the excavation of different layers of meaning of the avenue’s architecture.

While cultural studies of imperial Beijing offer a sociopolitical framework,¹⁷ new research on Republican Beijing lays the foundation for understanding the city’s urban environment before the dramatic transformation during the socialist period. Delineating the city’s responses to various sociopolitical changes in the first half of the twentieth century, these studies reveal that Republican Beijing was a mixture of old and new,¹⁸ and that “old Beijing” prior to “liberation” was not as old and traditional¹⁹ as discussions during the PRC era assumed. Some publications in Chinese provide indispensable historical details on changes in city life and urban spaces before 1949.²⁰

Scholarship on PRC era urban culture focuses on Tiananmen Square as a symbol of political transformation.²¹ Wu Hung's study of the political history of Tiananmen Square monuments explores how architecture and urban space acquired meanings and how the meanings changed due to the changing cultural political contexts.²² Studies on the post-Mao era (1976–present) explore the impact of increased commercialization on urban life and spatial organization.²³

Rich in historical details about changes in Beijing's urban life and material culture, these studies mainly treat architecture and urban development as footnotes for cultural and political history. The built environment of Beijing serves mostly as a neutral backdrop for historical dramas, both grand events and ordinary lives, rather than as an active participant in them. Although it advances our understanding of the symbolic meaning of urban space in modern Chinese political life, scholarship on PRC Beijing frequently equates the creation of a political space to the representation of Mao's will. However, regardless of the original intentions of the authors, scholarship on the pre-Communist city helps to romanticize "old Beijing."²⁴ Most of this scholarship has ignored the voices of architects and city planners. The Communist urban strategy was often quickly condemned as a failure of CCP leaders' personal tastes or as their blind enthusiasm for the Soviet model,²⁵ and the urban plans produced during the PRC era have seldom been seriously studied.

A cultural historical approach to architectural history does not treat architecture simply as architectural sociology. Arnold Hauser is to some extent correct when he says that art has its own specific problems to solve beyond its social commitments.²⁶ Heinrich Wölfflin's tradition of stylistic analysis, Friedrich Hegel's *Zeitgeist*, and Alois Riegl's concept of *Kunstwollen* are useful tools as long as they are not treated in a teleological sense to claim the universality of aesthetic values. Although there is no gender-neutral or universal art-historical knowledge, there are standards for art and architecture in a given time and society that are the targets of artists, both as ideals to reach and as conventions to break. It is precisely the relative independence of art and architecture from politics and ideology that makes it possible to look to their relationships for a better understanding of a culture.

Scholarship dealing directly with twentieth-century Chinese architecture has provided some basic information on specific development strategies and on changes in the built environment in Beijing. Some offer basic facts about and brief introductions to the significant architectural projects of the first fifty years of the PRC era, as well as outlines of the political backgrounds and architectural policies during different periods.²⁷ Others record key moments in the history of Beijing city planning and contain the major drawings of each successive design.²⁸ A leading figure in both design practice and academic study in Chinese urban planning, Wu Liangyong focuses on

specific development strategies, especially in dealing with the historical city of Beijing, a theory he calls “organic renewal.”²⁹ These studies, written mostly by practicing architects and urban planners, are important for the rich professional detail and broad reference coverage they provide. However, focusing on physical structure and operating within a framework for which the built environment remains mostly a design problem leave little space for critical historical exploration and cultural political analysis.

This book offers a cultural and political history of Chang’an Avenue through detailed analysis of individual buildings and of specific design problems in planning. Chang’an Avenue is the creation of architects as well as politicians, of city planners as well as profit seekers. Politics clearly played a central role in the development of the avenue and in the urban transformation of Beijing. However, political instructions and government-generated cultural guidelines have to go through architects and engineers to be implemented. For a balanced picture of socialist Beijing, it is important to integrate the Chinese Communist Party’s political agenda as part of the architectural discourse and not treat architects’ debates as merely a footnote to Mao’s casual comments.

Modernism, Modernity, and Modernization

The issue of modernity is the theoretical core of this book. Modernity is used here to refer to the defining character of a modern culture in a broad cultural-political sense. Being modern means having a constant awareness of tradition as opposed to “modern” and a belief in the progressive nature of future development. Chinese modernity in the twentieth century is an ever-updating project, a self-conscious replacement of “modern” with “modernization” to create an unself-conscious historical continuity, as evinced in the endless attempts to complete Chang’an Avenue.

Modernism as a mainstream architectural style has recently been criticized. Some argue that architectural modernism is an artificial construction of a group of architects, historians, and critics that eliminates all other practices from their self-promoting historical narration.³⁰ Others propose replacing the concept of “modernism as a paradigm of style” with “discourse of modernism” as a methodological model to resolve the analytical problems and incoherencies in current discussion of twentieth-century architecture.³¹ Such a replacement shifts modernism from a style to an ethically grounded material practice. If the concepts of modernism versus traditionalism or modernism versus regionalism are false polarizations in the West, the transplantation of these concepts to China is more problematic. Thus “modernism” as used in

this book is also only of discursive value. It offers a common ground for Chinese architectural modernity to take shape and a rhetorical base for ever-updating modernization to take place.

New scholarship on Beijing and modern Chinese architecture focuses on the issue of modernity. An analysis of imperial Beijing within a cross-cultural theoretical framework of power and subjectivity sheds new lights on the north-south axis of the ancient capital.³² The application of tradition versus modernization, or essence versus form, makes it possible to create a master narrative on modern Chinese architecture, simultaneously entailing more critical evaluation.³³ Case studies with different analytical approaches contextualize modern Chinese architectural practice within a global theoretical and practical framework and explore an alternative modernity to the Western model.³⁴ Studies on the contemporary built environment in China highlight the uniqueness of the Chinese architectural modernity, such as the work unit as an urban form.³⁵

Modernity in Chinese architecture has other unique features in comparison with its Western counterparts. For instance, significant architectural works have been created collectively since 1949 and often bear no individual creators' names. As Henri Lefebvre has pointed out, the boundaries between social product and artistic work are not always clear, and an artistic work does not have to be associated with the uniqueness of individual creation.³⁶ While the Chinese socialist stance is quite akin to some of the avant-garde movements in early twentieth-century Europe, the latter were criticized at the time as bourgeois. This is not the only contradiction and inconsistency in the discourse on Chinese architectural modernity, which will be revealed through a deconstructionist³⁷ reading of materials—buildings, drawings, and archival documents—generated by the historical entity known as “modern China.”

The modern China is ever changing. So are the spaces and activities along Chang'an Avenue. While the revival of the north-south axis accompanying the fanfare of the 2008 Beijing Olympics distracted some attention from Chang'an Avenue, the recent installation and removal of the Confucius statue³⁸ in front of the National Museum to the south of the avenue signaled the continuing struggle over the control of public space. The history of Chang'an Avenue and the modernization project in Chinese architecture that it represents provide a physical and conceptual framework for understanding of these events.