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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A chronology of the field of modern Chinese architectural history, 1986-2012



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Abstract

The research of modern Chinese architectural history formally started in the mid-1980s and the first conference held in 1986 in Beijing marks the establishment of the field. Over the past 26 years, this emerging field has developed fast and steadily. As a result, thirteen biennial conferences have been held since 1986, and academic products of various forms with over ten million characters have been published. This article surveys the development of modern Chinese architectural history as a field of scholarly inquiry in China and outlines some of keystone events in the past 26 years. It also charts out how some key concepts of the field, such as timeline, geography and research approaches have been evolving over time. The article introduces some of the most significant studies in modern Chinese architectural history from the middle 1980s to the present.

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1. Introduction

In the West, modern history or modern era refers to that of the historical period following the Middle Ages, roughly after the sixteenth century. In China, however, unlike that in the West, the term “modern history,” which has often appeared on previous pages, has a different connotation.

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It has been widely accepted that China's modern times began along with the first Opium War (1840-1842), and ended in 1949 when the People's Republic of China was founded. The history before 1949 belongs to “feudal times,” while the period after 1949 up to now is called contemporary history, describing the span of historical events that are immediately relevant to the present time under the Communist regime. As such, Chinese modern times (*jindai*) is a specific concept referring to the period between 1840 and 1949 (Liangyu, 2002).

It is now crystal that various projects in Chinese modern times are part of the longer process of modernization to build a strong and wealthy state that is still ongoing nowadays. The term “modern” contains a larger meaning than that before 1949. Therefore, in order to acknowledge this fact and reduce confusion among audience outside

China, “early modern times” is used to translate the Chinese expression of *jindai* in this paper, which deals with the history between 1840 and 1949.

In China, the research on modern Chinese architectural history bracketing the time period 1840-1949 can be generally divided into two stages: the first spanned from the 1940s to the 1970s, and the second that is ongoing at present began in the mid-1980s. After years of preparations, the first symposium on modern Chinese architectural history was held in Beijing in October 1986, which marked the emergence of a new field. It has been 26 years since the first conference of modern Chinese architectural history with considerable achievements. A general review of the origin and development of the emerging field in the past 26 years since 1986 onwards is imperative.

2. Relevant research before the 1980s

In 1944, Liang Sicheng, the founding father of the discipline of Chinese architectural history, finished his landmark book *History of Chinese Architecture*. In its last chapter, titled “Conclusions—Architecture in the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic,” Liang (2001) gave a concise summary of the recent practice of modern architecture in China. This is an early historical account of modern Chinese architecture.

The first formal attempt of comprehensive research on Chinese modern architecture history in China was initiated by the National Institute of Building Science under the Ministry of Construction between October 1958 and October 1961. As a result, a national survey of existing modern architecture was conducted in 1958, and material compilation of “the three history” on architecture after the national “Architectural History Symposium” in October 1958 came to the fruition of *The Brief History of Chinese Modern Architecture* (first draft)¹. (Figure 1) It was the first textbook on modern Chinese architectural history, though still a rough draft at this time, for higher educational institutions. Compiling this draft mobilized all strength possible and attracted preeminent scholars to work together. Formally-published in 1962 with substantial revisions to the first draft, it set up a solid foundation for succeeding research and had an important place in the field of modern Chinese architectural history. (Figure 2)

Two years later after the first textbook was published in the mainland, Su Gin-djih, a vigorous architect in the nineteen twenties and thirties, published his book *Chinese Architecture—Past and Contemporary Su*, 1964 in Hong Kong, who included modern Chinese architectural development since the Republic (1911-1949) in his book. It is an important monograph on the research of modern Chinese architecture published outside the mainland.

In mainland China, however, architectural research was interrupted during Cultural Revolution. It was not until July 1979, *the History of Chinese Architecture* was published,

¹The Committee of Compilation of Modern Chinese Architectural History (members including Yang Shenchu, Huang Shuye, Hou Youbin, Lu zuqian, Wang Shiren, and Wang Shaozhou). *Modern Chinese Architectural History (First Draft)*. Beijing: Institute of Compilation and Translation on Architectural Science and Information Press, 1959. This edition was printed for internal circulation but not formally published.

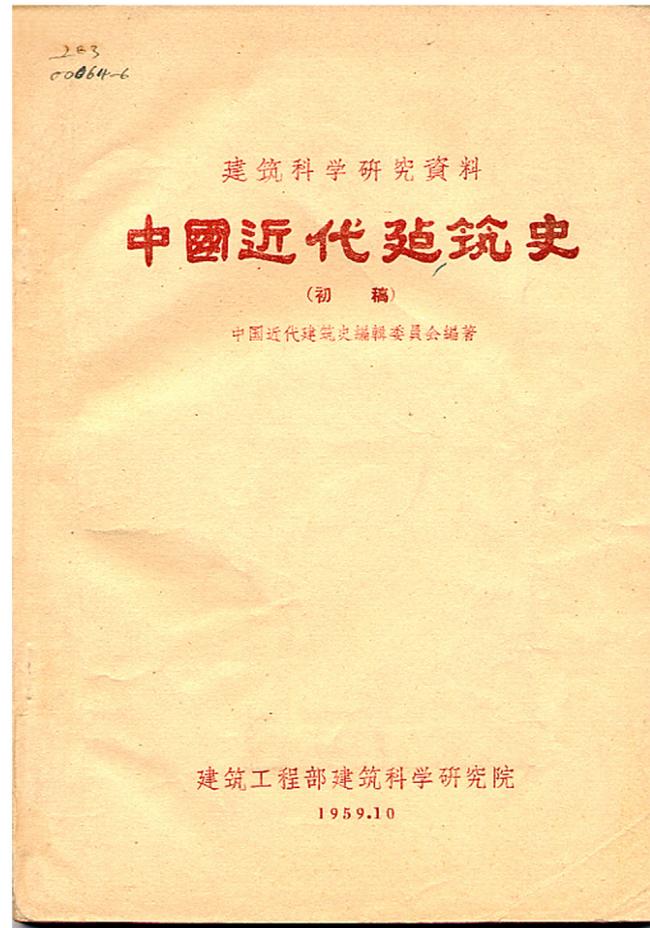


Figure 1 The cover of *The Brief History of Chinese Modern Architecture* (first draft).

and was used as the textbook for the course of Chinese architectural history in colleges. The second part, “Modern Chinese Architecture” in this book was basically an abridged version of the 1962 edition of *The Brief History of Chinese Modern Architecture*, and has been reprinted several times². However, compared to its first draft in 1958, the content was considerably cut down, because the part on modern Chinese architectural history is merely added to the book at the end after elucidation of traditional Chinese architecture as the main part of the book.

The abovementioned accomplishments on the research of modern Chinese architectural history before the 1980s have prepared bedrocks for further development, yet the research before the reform era was sporadic and limited in general. With political and economic restrictions in the 1960s and the 70s, the research on modern Chinese architectural history, like other academic disciplines, generally came to a halt.

²Compilation Group of Chinese Architectural History. *Chinese Architectural History*. Beijing: China Architecture & Building Press, 1982 (first edition); 1986 (second edition); 1993 (third edition); 2001 (fourth edition); 2004 (fifth edition).

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