

Науковы Артыкул

**Ад уражання да структуры: развіццё гістарычнай
рэпрэзентацыі ў архітэктурных малюнках Ляна Сычэна**

Lina Wang and Xiao Wang

Beijing University of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Beijing 100044, China

Анататыя. Гэта даследаванне прапануе ўсебаковае пераасэнсаванне адной з самых ранніх сістэматычных спроб вызначыць і замацаваць паслядоўную кітайскую архітэктурную традыцыю ў межах сучаснай праектнай практыкі. Засяроджваючыся на Ляне Сычэні (1901–1972), ключавай фігуры ў гісторыі кітайской архітэктуры, аўтар(ы) змяшчае(юць) яго працу ў шырэйшы культурны імпульс ранняга XX стагоддзя імкненне пацвердзіць гістарычную ідэнтычнасць Кітая. Выкарыстоўваючы архітэктурныя малюнкі адначасова як асноўны аб'ект аналізу і як аналітычны інструмент, артыкул даследуе, як візуальныя рэпрэзентацыі Ляна эвалюцыянувалі на розных этапах яго кар'еры. Тры ключавыя малюнкі 1920-х і 1930-х гадоў супастаўляюцца і інтэрпрэтуюцца праз іканаграфічна-іконалагічную прызму, каб прасачыць зрухі ў яго разуменні і выкарыстанні архітэктурнага мінулага. Вынікі сведчаць пра паступовую трансфармацыю таго, як Лян канструяваў традыцыю: ад атмасферных, эмацыйна насычаных эвакуацый «кітайскасці» да больш свядомых намаганняў узгадніць гістарычную вобразнасць са структурнай логікай. Гэтыя змены высвечваюць не толькі сталенне яго тэарэтычнай пазіцыі адносна «правільнага» і «слёнага» архітэктурнага мінулага, але і тое, якім чынам яго метады рэпрэзентацыі фармавалі сучаснае бачанне кітайской архітэктурнай ідэнтычнасці. У выніку даследаванне сцвярджае, што малюнкі Ляна маюць аўтаномную доказную каштоўнасць: яны дакументуюць станаўленне кананічнай архітэктурнай мовы, якая злучыла гістарычную павагу з выклякімі і патрэбамі мадэрнага праектавання. Пераацэньваючы гэтыя візуальныя матэрыялы, аўтар(ы) паглыбляе(юць) разуменне таго, як архітэктурная рэпрэзентацыя пасрэднічала стварэнне кітайской архітэктурнай мадэрнасці ў крытычны гістарычны момант.

Ключавыя слова: Кітайская архітэктурная спадчына; Лян Сычэн; архітэктурная рэпрэзентацыя; гістарычная іканаграфія; узгодненасць вобраза і структуры; сучасная кітайская архітэктура; праектны дыскурс 1920-х–1930-х гадоў

Research Article

From Impression to Structure: The Development of Historical Representation in Liang Sicheng's Architectural Drawings

Lina Wang and Xiao Bu Wang

Beijing University of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Beijing 100044, China

Abstract. This study offers a comprehensive re-examination of one of the earliest systematic attempts to define and embed a coherent Chinese architectural tradition within modern design practice. Focusing on Liang Sicheng (1901–1972), a central figure in Chinese architectural history, the research situates his work within the broader cultural aspiration to reaffirm China's historical identity during the early twentieth century. Using architectural drawings both as the primary object of study and as the analytical instrument, the paper investigates how Liang's visual representations evolved across different phases of his career. Three key drawings from the 1920s and 1930s are juxtaposed and interpreted through an iconographic and iconological framework to trace shifts in his understanding and use of the architectural past. The findings reveal a gradual transformation in how Liang constructed tradition moving from atmospheric evocations of "Chineseness" to more deliberate efforts that aligned historical imagery with structural logic. These developments illuminate not only his maturing theoretical stance on the "correct" and "glorious" architectural past but also the ways his representational methods shaped a modern vision of Chinese architectural identity. The study ultimately argues that Liang's drawings possess an autonomous evidentiary value, documenting the formation of a canonical architectural language that bridged historical reverence with modern design concerns. By reassessing these visual materials, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how architectural representation mediated the creation of Chinese architectural modernity during a critical historical moment.

Keywords: Chinese architectural heritage; Liang Sicheng; architectural representation; historical iconography; image–structure coherence; modern Chinese architecture; 1920s–1930s design discourse

Academic editor: Hayley Williams

Received: October 23, 2025 **Revised:** November 22, 2025 **Accepted:** December 01, 2025 **Published:** December 20, 2025

Introduction

Despite China's rapid embrace of modernity across political, economic, and cultural spheres, architects have consistently articulated the need to design in ways that remain recognizably Chinese. This long-standing aspiration to anchor new architectural expressions in a venerable past has influenced the country's architectural landscape for more than a century. It is not only upheld by architects and scholars but also echoed at the political level, where tradition is often invoked as a means of strengthening cultural identity, particularly in response to historical traumas such as foreign invasions and the perceived cultural challenge posed by Japan.

Against this broader backdrop, Liang Sicheng (1901–1972) stands out as a major figure whose scholarship and design advocacy significantly shaped how Chinese architectural tradition was theorized in the early twentieth century. During the 1920s and 1930s, when architects first attempted to systematically integrate historical knowledge into modern practice, Liang developed a comprehensive framework combining architectural history with contemporary design methodology. His dual role as historian and architect allowed him to articulate a vision in which the architectural past could meaningfully inform the architecture of the future. Consequently, his work has become foundational not only for writing a history of modern Chinese architectural thought but also for understanding how tradition was consciously constructed and mobilized.

A substantial body of research has examined Liang's writings and theoretical contributions (Hsia, 1990; Lai, 1996; Zhao, 2001, 2011; Li, 2002, 2012; Steinhardt, 2004; Ding, 2013; Zhu, 2014). Yet, only a limited number of studies most notably Zhu (2009) have explored his drawings as independent analytical material capable of revealing how he conceptualized architectural meaning. Most scholarship has treated his drawings as mere illustrations of his written arguments. This article departs from that approach by positioning Liang's drawings as primary evidence, arguing that they possess their own interpretive weight and trace shifts in his understanding of the architectural past more transparently than his prose. By examining several representative drawings produced during key phases of Liang's early career, this study investigates how his interpretation of historical architecture evolved and how these changes informed his broader theoretical stance on identifying the “correct” and “glorious” Chinese past. Through this analysis, the article highlights the essential role of drawing as both method and medium in shaping Liang's conceptualization of tradition and its subsequent impact on the formation of modern Chinese architectural identity.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts an iconographic and iconological analytical approach to investigate how Liang Sicheng's architectural drawings reflect the evolution of his interpretation of the Chinese architectural past. Rather than treating the drawings as secondary illustrations supporting his written arguments, this research considers them primary visual evidence capable of revealing shifts in Liang's theoretical orientation and representational methods. Three drawings from key stages of his early career 1926, 1932, and 1937 were selected because they correspond to distinct phases of his development as both an architect and a historian.

The analytical process involved a close comparative reading of these three drawings, focusing on variations in composition, representational technique, linework, structural articulation, and the relationship between visual imagery and constructional logic. This comparison allowed the study to identify how Liang gradually moved from atmospheric and picturesque renderings toward more rigorously constructed drawings that emphasize structural coherence. Particular attention was given to how Liang's Western architectural education, especially the Beaux-Arts representational tradition, influenced his early methods and how these methods were subsequently adapted through his engagement with Chinese historical buildings.

To contextualize the drawings, the study integrates evidence from Liang's documented fieldwork and published analyses of significant historical sites, including his 1932 study of Guanyin Hall and his 1937 investigation of the East Hall at Foguang Temple. These two cases serve as critical reference points because they exemplify the transition in Liang's thought from constructing atmospheric images of the architectural past to articulating a more deliberate and theoretically grounded representation of structural and aesthetic coherence.

A comparative table summarizing the main findings is included in the Results section, in line with the structure of the original article. The preparation of this table formed an essential part of the methodological process, as it

synthesizes the stylistic, historical, and theoretical distinctions among the three stages of Liang's representational practice. However, all figures and the table remain located in the Results section, as in the original publication.



Figure 1. Liang sicheng: Elevation of a memorial auditorium. Source: The Pennsylvania triangle, X (Liang, 1927).

Results

The comparative analysis of the three selected drawings reveals a clear evolution in Liang Sicheng's approach to representing the Chinese architectural past. His earliest drawing from 1926 demonstrates a picturesque and atmospheric style, in which the visual intention is guided primarily by a desire to evoke a generalized sense of "Chineseness." At this stage, Liang relied on intuitive imagery rather than structural precision, illustrating how he initially approached tradition by assembling visual impressions of the past. The 1932 watercolour elevation of Guanyin Hall marks a decisive transition toward monumental representation. This drawing highlights the grandeur of the building's form and reflects Liang's expanding theoretical interest in shaping a "correct" and "glorious" past. Guanyin Hall originally reconstructed in 984 AD served not only as a crucial historical discovery but also as a visual model through which Liang connected Liao-period architecture with what he believed to be the broader aesthetic spirit of the Tang period. The elevation emphasizes proportional refinement, classical revival qualities, and the architectural dignity that Liang increasingly associated with China's most exemplary past.



Figure 1. Liang Sicheng: The watercolour elevation of Guanyin Pavilion (©Chinese Academy of Cultural Heritage)

A major transformation occurs in 1937 with Liang's drawing of the East Hall at Foguang Temple, the oldest verified Tang wooden building he had encountered. In this drawing, Liang completely abandons atmospheric rendering in favor of analytical accuracy. By juxtaposing the elevation and the section within the same composition, he emphasizes both the building's iconic image and its structural logic. The use of contour lines, wood-grain-fill in the section plane, and the balanced projection of the background illustrate Liang's growing commitment to representing the coherence between appearance and structure a principle that would become foundational in his architectural theory.

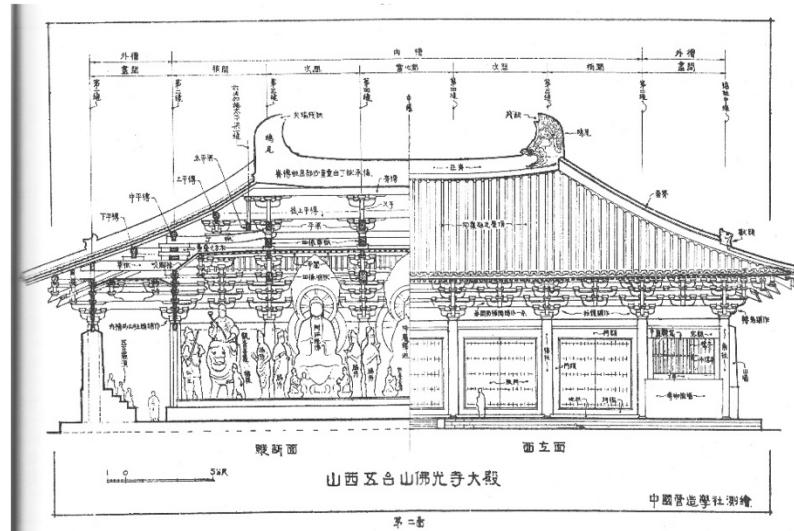


Figure 2. Liang Sicheng: Juxtapositional elevation and section of East Hall in Foguang Si (Liang, 1944).

The progression observed across Fig. 1, Fig. 2, and Fig. 3 shows how Liang's theoretical position matured from using the past unintentionally to constructing it consciously through a critical, historically grounded method. His emotional responses recorded in his writing describing the East Hall as "unexpected" and "overwhelming" (Liang 1941; Liang 1944) further demonstrate how the discovery reinforced his conviction that Tang architecture represented the pinnacle of Chinese architectural achievement.

To synthesize these findings, a comparative table summarizes the distinctions among the three stages of Liang's development covering stylistic tendencies, historical context, representational techniques, preferred architectural styles, and theoretical orientation. This table clarifies how Liang's understanding of the architectural past evolved in tandem with changes in both historical knowledge and representational strategy.

Table 1. The development of Liang's use of the past as shown in the way he constructed tradition

Aspect	Fig. 1	Fig. 2	Fig. 3
Key Year	1926	1932	1937
Drawing style	Picturesque drawing	Watercolour rendering elevation	Juxtaposition of the elevation and structure
Historical context	The world's interest in revealing Chinese ancient relics	Native interests vying against their counterparts; the formational stage of Liang's architectural theory	The maturation of Liang's architectural theory
The method of representing the past	Creating Chinese atmosphere	Monumental architectural image	Coherence of image and structure
The method of using the past in design	Collage of the elements/fragments of the past in the Beaux-Arts style of design	Bringing the correct and proportional architectural image into the design	N/A
Architectural style preferred	Qing (late imperial period) Style	Tang	Tang
The architectural theory of constructing the tradition	Using the past unintentionally	Constructing a glorious image of the past intentionally	Mature and autonomous appreciation of the coherence of image and structure

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Liang Sicheng's representational methods evolved in parallel with the gradual clarification of his architectural theory concerning the Chinese past. His early drawings, such as the 1926 picturesque rendering, reveal an intuitive engagement with historical imagery, where the architectural past served primarily as a visual reservoir from which atmospheric impressions were assembled. This stage reflects Liang's early

exposure to the widespread international fascination with Chinese antiquity, as well as the influence of Western educational environments that encouraged the creative reworking of historical elements.

Liang's representational approach became more theoretically oriented in the early 1930s, particularly through his study of Guanyin Hall in 1932. This building, reconstructed in the Liao period but closely aligned with the proportional principles of the Song and Tang traditions, provided Liang with a tangible model for articulating a "correct" architectural image. His use of the terminology from Ying Zao Fa Shi when describing Guanyin Hall, and his comparison with Dunhuang mural depictions, illustrates his determination to ground representation in historical accuracy rather than impressionistic evocation. At this stage, Liang began to distinguish between superficial revivalism and historically coherent architectural expression.

The most significant theoretical shift occurred after his 1937 encounter with the East Hall of Foguang Temple, the oldest verified Tang wooden structure known at the time. Liang's drawing of this building combining elevation and section signals a critical departure from previous modes of representation. The juxtaposition of image and structural analysis in Fig. 3 is not merely a technical adjustment; it represents Liang's adoption of a conceptual framework in which architectural tradition is understood as the unity of external form and internal construction. The drawing demonstrates a mature understanding of architectural meaning, where the past is represented not through aesthetic impression but through structural logic, proportional clarity, and material expressiveness.

This evolution in representation corresponds to Liang's larger theoretical arguments from the 1940s, in which he increasingly emphasized Tang architecture as the "glorious" and authoritative past. His descriptions of the East Hall full of emotion and intellectual certainty indicate that this discovery validated his belief that tradition should be reconstructed through its most exemplary form. The drawing style he developed at this stage also informed later works, including the plates for *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture*, where similar techniques were used to reinforce the structural nature of Chinese buildings. These stylistic and analytical advancements align with Rudolf Arnheim's theory of "figure and ground," which Liang indirectly applied when manipulating contour lines and sectional textures to emphasize structural qualities. Overall, the discussion highlights that Liang's construction of architectural tradition was neither static nor predetermined. Instead, it developed through a dynamic process shaped by new historical discoveries, deepening field investigations, theoretical reflection, and evolving representational techniques. The coherence of image and structure first fully realized in the 1937 drawing of the East Hall became the cornerstone of Liang's mature architectural theory. These findings underscore the broader significance of drawing not merely as a visual tool but as an interpretive medium through which architectural history, identity formation, and modern design discourse were actively constructed.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that Liang Sicheng's drawings serve as a critical medium through which his evolving understanding of Chinese architectural traditions can be traced. The comparative examination of drawings from 1926, 1932, and 1937 reveals a clear shift from intuitive, atmosphere-driven representations toward analytical, structurally coherent depictions grounded in historical accuracy. As Liang encountered more verified early architectural examples through field research, particularly the East Hall at Foguang Temple, his methods of representation transformed accordingly. The juxtaposition of elevation and section in the 1937 drawing marks a pivotal moment in which appearance and structure were intentionally integrated to convey the full architectural logic of the past.

Taken together, the findings illustrate that Liang's construction of architectural tradition was not static but developed through continuous engagement with new discoveries, evolving methodologies, and deepened theoretical reflection. Drawing became more than a visual tool; it functioned as a form of scholarly inquiry that shaped Liang's

architectural thinking and contributed to the broader formation of modern Chinese architectural identity. By reassessing these drawings, the study underscores their importance not only as historical artifacts but also as active agents in the intellectual development of China's architectural discourse.

References

Arnheim, R. (1956). *Art and visual perception: A psychology of the creative eye*. University of California Press.

Atkin, T. (2011). Chinese architecture students at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1920s. In J. W. Cody, N. S. Steinhardt, & T. Atkin (Eds.), *Chinese architecture and the Beaux-Arts*. University of Hawai'i Press.

Barnhart, R. M., Cahill, J., Nie, C., Lang, S., Wu, H., & Yang, X. (1997). *Three thousand years of Chinese painting*. Yale University Press.

Cody, J. W. (2001). *Building in China: Henry K. Murphy's "adaptive architecture", 1914–1935*. Chinese University Press.

d'Alleva, A. (2005). *Methods and theories of art history*. Laurence King Publishing.

Denison, E. (2017). *Architecture and the landscape of modernity in China before 1949*. Routledge.

Ding, Y. (2013). Discovering the Dule-si (发现独乐寺). *Architectural Journal*, 1–9.

Drexler, A. (1977). *The architecture of the École des Beaux-Arts*. Martin Secker and Warburg.

Evans, R. (1984). Postcards from reality. *AA Files*, 109–111.

Evans, R. (1986). Translations from drawing to building. *AA Files*, 3–18.

Fairbank, W. (1994). *Liang and Lin: Partners in exploring China's architectural past*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Forty, A. (2000). *Words and buildings: A vocabulary of modern architecture*. Thames & Hudson.

Fu, Z. (1993). *Chinese classic-style new buildings: A historical research of the official new buildings of China in the 20th century*. Nantian Publisher.

Harbeson, J. F. (2008). *The study of architectural design: With special reference to the program of the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design*. Boydell & Brewer.

Hsia, C.-J. (1990). S. C. Liang, YTHS and the idea of "Chinese architectural history" as a discourse formation (营造学社与梁思成建筑史论述构造之理论分析). *Taiwan Radical Quarterly in Social Studies*, 3, 5–50.

Lai, D. (1996). The formation and features of Liang Sicheng's architectural education thoughts. *Architectural Journal*, 26–29.

Lai, D. (2007a). *Chinese Modern: Sun Yat-sen's Mausoleum as a crucible for defining modern Chinese architecture*. University of Chicago.

Lai, D. (2007b). Designing an ideal Chinese-style modern building: Liang Sicheng's historical writing and Liao–Song style in the design of the Nanjing National Central Museum (设计一座理想的中国风格的现代建筑 梁思成中国建筑史叙述与南京国立中央博物院辽宋风格设计再思). In *Studies in modern Chinese architectural history*. Tsinghua University Press.

Lai, D., Wu, J., & Xu, S. (2016). *National state: Modernity and nationality of Chinese city and architecture* (民族国家 中国城市和建筑的现代化与国家性). Chinese Architecture Industrial Publishing.

Leach, A. (2010). *What is architectural history?* Polity Press.

Li, J. (2012). Classicism, structural rationalism and poetic logic: Re-examination of Lin Huiyin and Liang Sicheng's early design and theory (古典主义、结构理性主义与诗性的逻辑 林徽因梁思成早期建筑设计与思想再检讨). *Journal of Chinese Architectural History*, 1, 390–434.

Li, S. (2002). Writing a modern Chinese architectural history: Liang Sicheng and Liang Qichao. *Journal of Architectural Education*, 56, 35–45.

Liang, S. (1927). A memorial auditorium for the graduate grade, student problem No. 3. *The Pennsylvania Triangle*, 10, 13–15.

Liang, S. (1932a). Architecture of the Tang dynasty (唐代建筑研究). *Bulletin of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture*, 3, 75–114.

Liang, S. (1932b). Two Liao structures of Tu-lo Ssu, Chi Hsien (蓟县独乐寺观音阁山门考). *Bulletin of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture*, 3, 1–92.

Liang, S. (1941). China's oldest wooden structure. *Asia*.

Liang, S. (1944). Architecture in Fo-kuang Ssu of Wu-t'ai Shan (记五台山佛光寺的建筑). *Bulletin of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture*, 7, 13–62.

Liang, S. (1985). *A pictorial history of Chinese architecture: A study of the development of its structural system and the evolution of its types*. MIT Press.

Liang, S. (2011). *Chinese architecture: Art and artifacts*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Liang, S., & Lin, H. (1932). Miscellaneous notes on architecture in suburban Peiping (平郊建筑杂录). *Bulletin of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture*, 3, 98–110.

Liang, S., & Liu, Z. (1935a). *Collection of plates with notes for Chinese architectural design reference: Vol. 1 Platform* (建筑设计参考图集 台基). Society for Research in Chinese Architecture.

Liang, S., & Liu, Z. (1935b). *Collection of plates with notes for Chinese architectural design reference* (建筑设计参考图集). Society for Research in Chinese Architecture.

Lin, H. (1932). On the principal characteristics of Chinese architecture (论中国建筑之几个特征). *Bulletin of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture*, 3, 163–179.

Lin, W.-C. (2011). Preserving China: Liang Sicheng's survey photos from the 1930s and 1940s. *Visual Resources*, 27, 129–145.

Lukens, R. W. (1979). *The changing role of drawing and rendering in architectural education* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Pennsylvania.

Powell, H., & Leatherbarrow, D. (1982). *Masterpieces of architectural drawing*. Orbis.

Robbins, E. (1994). *Why architects draw*. MIT Press.

Steinhardt, N. S. (2004). The Tang architectural icon and the politics of Chinese architectural history. *Art Bulletin*, 86, 228–254.

Steinhardt, N. S. (2011). Chinese architecture on the eve of the Beaux-Arts. In J. W. Cody, N. S. Steinhardt, & T. Atkin (Eds.), *Chinese architecture and the Beaux-Arts*. University of Hawai'i Press.

Su, G.-D. (1964). *Chinese architecture, past and contemporary*. Sin Poh Amalgamated.

Xu, S. (1999). *Japan's research on Chinese cities and architecture* (日本对中国城市与建筑的研究). China Water & Power Press.

Zhao, C. (2001). Nationalism and classicalism: Contradictions in Liang Sicheng's architectural theory. In F. Zhang (Ed.), *Research and conservation of Chinese modern architecture* (Vol. 2). Tsinghua University Press.

Zhao, C. (2011). Elevation or facade: Re-evaluating Liang Sicheng's interpretation of timber architecture in light of Beaux-Arts classicism. In *Chinese architecture and the Beaux-Arts*. University of Hawai'i Press.

Zhu, J. (2009). *Architecture of modern China: A historical critique*. Routledge.

Zhu, T. (2014). *Liang Sicheng and his period*. Guangxi Normal University Press.