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Huang Zuoshen and the Bauhaus-Based Architectural Education at St. John's University, Shanghai, 1942–1952

There were no Chinese architects attending the Weimar, Dessau, or Berlin Bauhaus school from 1919 to 1933. The connection between Chinese modern architecture and the Bauhaus, however, cannot be ignored. Most of the previous scholarship on the emergence and development of modern architecture in China focuses on the “first generation” of Chinese modern architects who were trained under the American Beaux-Arts system and returned to China to practice during the early 1930s.¹ For instance, Chinese architects who graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, notably Liang Sicheng and Yang Tingbao,² have dominated the historiographic narratives of Chinese modern architecture. Their lives and practices have received considerable attention and provoked heated discussions. In contrast, the influence of the Bauhaus school on Chinese modern architecture remains understudied, despite the fact that the Bauhaus shaped modernism in architecture throughout the world.³ Aiming to explore the initial transfer of the Bauhaus ideas, especially its pedagogy, to China, this paper focuses on Chinese architect and educator, Huang Zuoshen (1915–1975),⁴ whose educational background as well as professional and teaching career are inextricably linked to his encounter of the Bauhaus tradition, more specially, his studies under Walter Gropius at the Graduate School of Design (GSD) of Harvard University, which was, according to William Jordy, the “most direct legacy of the Bauhaus.”⁵

Thus far, Huang's life and career have rarely been discussed.⁶ The reason for the neglect is twofold. First, Huang died at a relatively early age after the criticism and attacks during the Cultural Revolution of the 1970s. Much of his work—both writings and design projects—were destroyed. The Department of Architecture of St. John's University (SJU), where Huang served as the director after he returned from the United States, was forced in 1952 to be integrated with other institutions in Shanghai. As a result, very few documents, especially student works, have survived; even fewer are now accessible for research. Second, Huang's view of architecture differed greatly from that of

1 According to the topic of “Chinese Architecture” in *Oxford Bibliographies* edited by Nancy Steinhardt, the writing in English about modern Chinese architecture includes two parts: the beginning of modern construction in the first three decades of the twentieth century and the tumultuous years of war and internal strife that followed. The scholarship on Chinese modern architecture can also be divided into two chronological categories: before the 1940s and post-1940s. Among the books on pre-1940s content, Jeffery Cody's *Building in China: Henry K. Murphy's Adaptive Architecture, 1914–1935*, focuses on the American architect, Murphy, who practiced in China, managing to produce a balance in architectural design between Western technologies and Chinese stylistic features. *Chinese Architecture and the Beaux-Arts*, edited by Jeffery Cody, Nancy Steinhardt, and Tony Atkin, investigates the education of Chinese students in the United States in the 1920s and the subsequent construction of modern buildings in China, primarily in Beaux-Arts style. Important articles, such as Ruan Xing's seminal essay, “Accidental Affinities: American Beaux-Arts in Twentieth-Century Chinese Architectural Education and Practice,” too, study Chinese students who came to the United States to study architecture and returned to China to design according to the Beaux-Arts methods.

2 In this paper, I am using the common way to spell out Chinese names: last name first and then first name. The method has been employed across many academic discourses and has become the predominant convention.

3 There is very little scholarship about the spread and transfer of the Bauhaus in China. For the recent contribution to this topic, see Zhang (no date); Hsiao/White 2015: 176–189. Also, the latest issue of the academic journal *Time + Architecture* was dedicated to the Bauhaus centennial.

4 Some earlier studies of Huang in Chinese normally spell his name as Huang Jo Shin, following the old, Wade-Giles transliteration. The most recent texts, however, have adopted the modern romanization system Pinyin, spelling it as Huang Zuoshen. His own writings in English used the English name Henry Jorson Huang, which he had been using since his education at the Anglican school in Tianjin. Given the readership of this paper, I chose to use his family name, Huang, throughout to avoid confusion.

5 Jordy 1969: 485.

6 In Chinese, there is one book, Qian Feng and Wu Jiang's *Commemorative Accounts of Huang Zuoshen*, and one master thesis, Qian Feng's "The Founding Father of Chinese Modern Architectural Education: Huang Zuoshen," dedicated to Huang's life and career.

7 Qian/Wu 2012: 36.

8 Tongji University Archives. The "Personal ideology statement" was an important component of some "struggle sessions" in communist states, especially in China. Party members who are forced to undergo "self-criticism" sessions are asked to produce either written or verbal statements detailing their ideological errors and affirming their renewed belief in the Party line. The truthfulness of this kind of document is therefore questionable.

9 Cormier 1986: 30.

his contemporaries who were selected to be the main protagonists of the "official" discourse of Chinese modern architecture. This politically determined preference—or deliberate omission—resulted in a one-sided understanding of modernism in Chinese architecture, eclipsing Huang's contribution to Chinese modern architecture. In this paper, I will first briefly introduce Huang's life and then provide an in-depth discussion of Huang's faithful adaptation of Gropius's pedagogical framework at both the Bauhaus and the GSD. Lastly, I will argue that Huang's curriculum at SJU was largely based on his study experience at the GSD, his understanding of Gropius's "total architecture" concept, and, more importantly, his acceptance of the "living" spirit of the "New Architecture" that motivated the founding of the Bauhaus.

Huang Zuoshen's Life

A discussion of Huang's contribution to architectural education in China may appropriately start with a brief introduction to his life. Huang Zuoshen was born in 1915 into a long-established intellectual family in Tianjin, a coastal town 80 miles southeast of Beijing. Huang's father, Huang Songpan, was well-versed in mathematics and self-taught in English. After serving in the army, he came to Tianjin and worked for the Asiatic Petroleum Company. He had five children, of whom Huang Zuoshen was the youngest.

Huang's family lived within the concession territories of Tianjin. Huang went to schools established for foreigners' children. He was sent by his father to England in 1932, four years after the famous couple Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin returned to China after studying at the University of Pennsylvania under Paul Philippe Cret and making a short trip to Europe. Huang entered the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA) in London to study structural engineering. Later he found himself more interested in architecture. Specifically, he was captivated by the architectural thinking of Walter Gropius, who, according to Huang, had lectured at the AA School in the late 1930s.⁷ Huang was also enchanted by Gropius's heroism. "I respected heroes simply because I wanted to become one of them," as he wrote in his "personal ideology statement" in 1952.⁸

Invited by Maxwell Fry, Gropius visited London in 1934 to avoid fascist persecution in Germany.⁹ During his stay, Gropius designed a few buildings in partnership with Fry, though he did not play as major a role as he had anticipated. Perhaps the reason for that, as P. Morton Shand contended, was that England had not been prepared for the "functional" architecture that Gropius could offer, even though there was no doubt that the English "free architecture" of the nineteenth century was the direct prototype of the functional house of Gropius's time. More likely, however, Gropius's limited English curbed his well-known ability to promote himself. When lecturing, Gropius always read a prepared paper, showed slides of his buildings in Germany, and then deliberately omitted the question-and-answer session at the end. Nevertheless, the English translation of his text *Neue Baukunst* (New Building), was published with a new title, *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus*, while he was

in London, effectively increasing the already high demand for speaking engagements that Gropius had received in England. According to Leslie Cormier, the autobiographer of his time in England, Gropius addressed his work to a wide range of audiences from Potter’s Craft Guild of Birmingham to the Bristol Design Industry Association and the young British modernists of the MARS (Modern Architectural Research) Group.¹⁰ Huang claimed that he had attended Gropius’s talks in London where he became interested in his progressive architectural ideas. When, in 1936, Gropius accepted the position at Harvard University Graduate School of Design offered by Joseph Hudnut and left for Cambridge in March 1937, Huang decided to follow him to the United States. He was admitted by Harvard in 1938, becoming Gropius’s first Chinese student (fig. 1).

Huang’s student records at the GSD are not yet available for research.¹¹ His decision to return to China in 1942, however, was clearly made by himself, at least according to his “personal ideology statement” in the 1950s. While studying in the United States, Huang came across a book about Communist China, *Red Star over China*, by Edgar Snow. Snow was an American journalist known for his reports on China and the Chinese Communist Revolution. Published in 1937, Snow’s book was the only available first-hand report about China at that time. His status as an international journalist and his experience of spending seven years in China, and more importantly four months in Yan’an (a name meaning “long peace”), the Communist-controlled area known as the “Red Capital,” made the book an authoritative account. Despite all of the contemporary debates on its factual validity, Snow’s romantic and sympathetic narrative represented a compelling story to Huang. The truthfulness of this kind of “personal ideology statement” is, of course, questionable. However, we have to remember that when Huang decided to return to China, the Pacific War had already broken out. Furthermore, Huang did mention in his “statement” that he was at that time just a young student studying with the most famous modernist architects in the world at the best American institution; he saw his working under the dominance of American architects as unacceptable. This career prospect is far more convincing in explaining his return to China. In 1942, he arrived at Shanghai with his fiancée Cheng Jiu, who had to give up her unfinished studies at the Art Institute of Boston.

Upon arrival in Shanghai, Huang accepted the invitation of Yang Kuanlin, the Dean of the Sze School of Engineering at St. John’s University (then called St. John’s College) in Shanghai, taking up a professorship appointment in its newly founded architecture department. Huang became the first full-time faculty member, as well as the director of the new program, and was responsible for establishing the curriculum. There were a number of reasons for him to choose SJU. First of all, St. John’s College had a proud history and very prestigious position in China during the first half of the twentieth century as it had been founded in 1879 by American missionaries, William Jones Boone and Joseph Schereschewsky, the Bishop of Shanghai, by combining two pre-existing Anglican colleges in Shanghai (fig. 2). Often regarded as the Harvard or Yale

10 Cormier 1986: 75–76.



Fig. 1 Huang at Harvard, exact year unknown

11 As per policy, Harvard University closes access to student records for research for 80 years after the date of the student’s separation from Harvard. Huang’s student records will be closed until July 1, 2022. According to the 1975 Alumni Directory, Huang was a registered non-degree student of Harvard GSD from 1938 to 1941. See 1975 Alumni Directory, Harvard Graduate School of Design, Francis Loeb Library.



Fig. 2 St. John’s University Campus, Shanghai, ca 1940

12 Cf. Lamberton 1955.

13 The United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia (UBCHEA) is an organization founded in 1922 that supports whole-person education in Protestant colleges and universities in Asia. It began its work in China. However, following the communist takeover of China, the United Board focused its efforts on educational work in other Asian nations. The Yale University Divinity School Library holds the UBCHEA records dating from 1882 to 1974, with a focus on the period 1922 to 1957.

14 When Huang was five years old, his father sent him to an Anglican school in Tianjin. From then on, he studied at schools established for foreigners' children, where he was always the only Chinese. Huang later studied abroad, living in both Europe and the United States. All these experiences made English nearly his native language. When he returned to China and joined St. John's University, he had to rely on English in both teaching and writing. Even during the Cultural Revolution, he wrote drafts for the "personal ideology statement" in English before translating them into Chinese.

15 Lamberton 1955: 53.



Fig. 3 Dormitory building for the Bank of China, late 1940s

of the country at that time, St. John's College introduced the American liberal arts model of education to China. The students were allowed to select most of the courses out of their own interests and to study a broad range of subjects. The college also encouraged student self-management and subsequently established China's first student associations as well as independent student publications.¹² The free atmosphere of learning that the college strongly promoted must have attracted Huang. Secondly, St. John's College was one of the institutions in China at that time that also registered as a member of the "United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia (UBCHEA)."¹³ Maintaining its status as a domestic Christian institution and yet independent from the Nationalist (KMT) government, St. John's College must have had special meaning for Huang, who came from a Quaker family. Furthermore, St. John's used English as its pedagogical language, with an intention of enhancing the communication of students with the world. Huang must have found it easier to use English to teach, as his English was much better than his Chinese.¹⁴ Last but not the least, Huang was impressed by SJU's emphasis on physical education. St. John's College was the first institution in China to incorporate modern sports activities into its extra-curricular activities. It founded the earliest professional soccer and basketball teams in China. Huang himself loved sports. He played tennis, hockey, and especially cricket, a sport that he had learned to play in London and then introduced to St. John's. It must have been the "western out-of-school spirit"¹⁵ that acted as another important factor in Huang's decision to join St. John's.

Huang established the curriculum of the architectural program at SJU after the GSD model. From 1942 to 1952, the Department of Architecture of SJU produced more than 30 graduates. Most of them became successful architects. A few of the top students continued their education at universities overseas. Lee Ying, for instance, followed Huang's earlier path, entering the GSD to study with Gropius and earning a master's degree in architecture. Several other students accepted Huang's invitation and taught at the architecture department of SJU. In fact, Huang had always been willing to expand the student body of SJU's Department of Architecture. Yang, the Dean of the Sze School of Engineering, however, did not want the department to grow too fast, despite the fact that the late 1940s witnessed the rapid economic growth of postwar China. As his teaching duties decreased, Huang had more time for his professional practice. In 1946, Huang joined the architectural design department of the Bank of China. He finished the designs for the dormitory building for the bank and residential building for their high-ranking employees, which showcased many traits of modern architecture (fig. 3). From 1946 to 1948, he served as a member of the committee for the Greater Shanghai Planning Commission, leading his students from SJU to assist with the work of producing some of their drawings. In 1948, Huang, together with Lu Shouqian, Wang Dahong, Chen Zhanxiang, and Zheng Guanxuan, cofounded the architectural firm Five United, which became a successful design firm and also a place where many SJU students worked as interns.

Due to the political situation, the members of Five United decided in 1949 to relocate the office to Taiwan. Huang's partners tried to persuade he to move with them. Huang, however, was concerned with the uncertainties of both KMT-controlled Taiwan and Communist Party-ruled China. While hesitating to make a decision, he again thought of Edgar Snow's book, which revived his earlier conviction to practice his architectural ideas in the most vibrant and promising nation. Huang strongly retained his belief in the modernist architecture that he had studied under Gropius at the GSD, believing that he could apply the true spirit of modernist architecture in teaching and his own architectural practice. Huang decided to stay in Shanghai, hoping to contribute to the construction of "Red China."¹⁶

The Korean War hit the economy of China dramatically, especially coming on the heels of the civil war, and delayed its postwar reconstruction. Mao Zedong was forced to declare a "lean toward the east," forming a close alliance with the Soviet Union. The newly signed Sino-Soviet Treaty resulted in a comprehensive collaboration, in which the Soviet Union provided considerable aid and guidance in every aspect of the new nation's operation, even in the realm of higher education. The government thereafter decided to remodel the whole college system after that of the Soviet Union, under what would later be called the "College Integration and Reorganization Initiative." This initiative was twofold: 1) to create specialist universities in the Soviet style, and 2) to dissolve private schools. The three most famous private schools in Shanghai—St. John's University, Aurora University,¹⁷ and Hujiang University—were all abolished. St. John's was broken up. Most of its faculties were incorporated into the East China Normal University. The architectural department became part of Tongji University. The educational experiment modeled after the GSD version of the Bauhaus school that was inaugurated and overseen by Huang Zuoshen came to an end.

From 1966 to 1976, Mao Zedong launched the sociopolitical movement in China known as the "Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution," with the aim to regain his personal control over the Communist Party and to eliminate his rivals. Huang was soon recognized as one of the "reactionary bourgeois academic authorities," a group of people "in authority who are taking the capitalist road."¹⁸ Huang and his wife underwent torture for 26 days, mainly because they had had contact with the British Council of Shanghai (I will return to this) and their British friend, Richard Harris, who had published essays in *The Times* criticizing the Chinese government. After this, Huang's health started to decline. In 1970, he left his teaching post, staying at home to take care of his wife. Once he had time, Huang would visit the bookstore that sold foreign books. The scholar whose research centers on Huang, Professor Qian Feng at Tongji University, told me that, when Huang discovered the built works by I. M. Pei, who had entered the GSD one year after Huang left for China, he got very emotional. Huang died on June 15, 1975, one month before he turned 60 and only one year before the end of the Cultural Revolution.¹⁹

16 Qian 2001: 14–15.

17 Aurora University was founded in 1904 by Father Joseph Ma Xiaogbo S.J and French Jesuits. Hujiang University, also known as Shanghai University, was established by the American Baptist Missionary Union and the Southern Baptist Convention in Shanghai. The two missions gathered in Shanghai in 1900 and collaborated to establish the Shanghai Baptist Theological Seminary in 1906 and Shanghai Baptist College in 1909. The two were combined in 1911 to form "Shanghai Baptist College and Theological Seminary." The name "Shanghai University" was adopted when it was registered with the Chinese government in 1929. Both Aurora University and Shanghai University were merged into East China Normal University in 1952.

18 See "Decision Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution," adopted on August 8, 1966, by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

19 Qian 2001: 31.

20 For detailed accounts of the history of the GSD, see Alofsin 2002. For a descriptive account of how Gropius was selected as the chair of the Department of Architecture and his collaboration with Dean Joseph Hudnut, see Pearlman 2007.

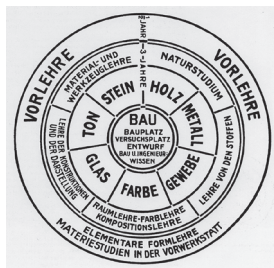


Fig. 4 The conceptual diagram showing the structure of the Bauhaus curriculum, 1922

21 Gropius’s ideas of the Bauhaus can be seen in, besides this 1919 manifesto, his *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus* (1935), “Education towards Creative Design” in *American Architect and Architecture* (1937), and “My Conception of the Bauhaus Idea” in *Scope of Total Architecture* (1943).

22 Droste 1993: 68–98.

23 Bayer/Gropius 1938: 34.

24 Pearlman 2007: 202.

25 Ibid.: 215–228.

26 “Graduate School of Design,” *Official Register of Harvard University*, 1946–47, 17. Cf. Pearlman 2007: 202–203.

Gropius’s Pedagogy at the GSD

Huang studied at the GSD from 1938 to 1941. During those years, Gropius was struggling to implement his American version of the Bauhaus’s architectural education.²⁰ Instead of recreating a Bauhaus school at Harvard, Gropius attempted to model the GSD curriculum after that of the Bauhaus in its central principle. In doing so, Gropius first tried to revive the famous “preliminary course” (*Vorkurs*) that had served as the backbone of the Bauhaus curriculum (fig. 4). The Bauhaus *Vorkurs* can be understood as an attempt to redefine the *Gesamtkunstwert* (total work of art), striving to “bring together all creative effort into one whole” and to “reunite all the disciplines of practical art—sculpture, painting, handicrafts, and the crafts—as inseparable components of a new architecture,” as he wrote in the famous 1919 “Program of the Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar.”²¹ This vision was later adopted in establishing the Bauhaus school’s educational pedagogy; workshops were set up to search for a balance between all artistic disciplines and modern production, including fine metallurgy, printing, bookbinding, cabinetry, weaving, mural painting, and sculpture.²² Gropius asserted that this training would “liberate” individual creativity by first introducing what the Bauhausers believed were “basic principles which underlie all creative activity in the visual arts” and then establishing a “universal language of form that is accessible to all people, regardless of their nationality or social status.”²³

Yet, what Gropius had in mind turned out not to be an easy task. Jill Pearlman, in her book on Gropius’s time at Harvard, documented the challenge Gropius faced while striving to practice the centerpiece of his pedagogy. After all, Gropius expected all beginning GSD students—no matter what major they would choose to pursue—to take the preliminary courses exclusively for six months. Dean Joseph Hudnut, however, did everything he could to constrain the influx of Bauhaus principles into the GSD, as he considered these preliminary courses “formalistic and irrelevant to architectural design.”²⁴

Nevertheless, the battle between Gropius and Hudnut resulted in a compromised solution. In 1950, Gropius proposed a program with a new name, “Design Fundamentals,” which was approved through the vote of the GSD faculty and President James Conant. Under this new structure, all first-year students in each of the GSD’s three departments (Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Regional Planning) were required to enroll in two core courses—Planning I and Design I.²⁵ More specifically, Planning I was conceived to let students explore the common principles and techniques of three fields of design—architecture, landscape architecture, and city planning. Students from all three departments were asked to work collaboratively on one particular aspect of a part of Boston or an area nearby, looking into available research materials, conducting interviews with officials and involving citizens, and finally, developing a comprehensive plan for the site. Design I was intended to introduce students to what the GSD catalog described as “the fundamental concepts of space, form, and function and the structural relationships by which these are expressed and controlled.”²⁶

In 1952, two years after Gropius began “Design Fundamentals,” Hudnut canceled the course, as President Conant’s funding ran out, and Hudnut did not want to pay for it out of his already strapped the GSD budget.²⁷ Gropius resigned from the GSD in protest against Hudnut’s decision. Before he did so, he pleaded his case for “Design Fundamentals” before a university-wide audience in the *Harvard Crimson*, arguing that “my whole faculty is in favor of “Design Fundamentals” and the only reason that it was being dropped was because “the dean is against it.”²⁸ Even though his proposal to revive the *Vorkurs* courses at Harvard was not favored by Dean Hudnut, Gropius’s primary concerns—the liberation of the creative powers of the individual and the social responsibility of modern architecture that motivated the founding of the Bauhaus—remained unchanged.

27 Pearlman 2007: 226.

28 The *Harvard Crimson* reported that the GSD had a \$10,000 deficit. Cf. Rivkin 1952: 1; Pearlman 2007: 226.

First, Gropius shared a conviction with early Bauhausers: artistic creation cannot be taught, because only “knowledge,” techniques, and handicraft skills are transmittable. Nevertheless, he asserted that creative powers in individuals can be stimulated.²⁹ In his view, the *Vorkurs* courses would best carry out the task—to stimulate inner creativity in students. As Gropius wrote in his 1939 pedagogical statement called “Training the Architect” after he became the chair of the architecture department at the GSD, “the true aim of all education” is “to stimulate enthusiasm towards greater effort.”³⁰ Throughout this text, Gropius repeatedly used “talented” to refer to individuals who were more suitable for the profession of architectural design. Those who were unfortunately not or “less” talented, however, have to deviate to pursue careers in “manual skill, construction, technical drawing, work technique, or cost estimating.”³¹

29 Franciscono 1971: 129.

30 Gropius 1939: 142.

31 Ibid.: 145.

Gropius’s aim of stimulating students’ creative powers certainly determined the way he shaped the GSD curriculum, which was most evidently reflected in his attitude toward the teaching of architectural history. It has been widely accepted that Gropius believed that history was one of those fields of knowledge that can be transmitted through teaching, whereas too much history could stifle individual creativity and inhibit the making of modern expression. He warned that “innocent” beginning students must avoid history because “the awe of the masters of the past is so great that frustration may develop from timidity.”³²

32 Gropius 1950: 74.

During his time at the Bauhaus, Gropius had abolished history courses in architectural education. He hoped to do the same at the GSD, arguing that “so long as we flounder about in a limitless welter of borrowed artistic expression, we shall not succeed in giving form and substance to our own culture.”³³ It is noteworthy to point out that Gropius was not against architectural history itself, but rather against “the old form of art history which was just learning by rote.”³⁴ In a recently published interview conducted by Jonathan Barnett in 1960, Gropius explained his attitude toward the teaching of architectural history:

33 Pearlman 2007: 209.

34 Barnett 2018: 408.

The very young man should not have too much history in the early stages of his training. He mustn’t become intimidated by the great masters. I

am against looking into books, books, books, to see what has gone before. When history is studied it should be studied analytically, to create an understanding of the kind of civilization which produced the architecture of the past. Education is not the accumulation of knowledge alone, but a method of approach and of finding one's own ways. This was our attitude at the Bauhaus, a fact which is not generally recognized. I did not wish to follow the example of those who teach in such a way as to produce small editions of themselves. My predecessor at Weimar was [Henry] Van de Velde, and all he could produce was little Van de Veldes. I felt that it was necessary to start with the objective facts which are the tools of understanding: materials, surface, volume, space, and color; and to try and destroy imitation everywhere.³⁵

35 Barnett 2018: 408.

In addition to stimulating students' creative powers, Gropius, through the *Vorkurs* courses, wanted to bring the art of architecture back to everyday reality. "The unity of all branches of design," for Gropius, was to fulfill the social responsibility of modern architecture—"make good designs available to all people."³⁶ Gropius expected that the new "modern architectonic art" inaugurated in 1919 would become "an integral part of the stuff of life, necessary for everyone in a civilized society."³⁷ Gropius acknowledged the "other-worldliness" of the contemporary status of art education and that the objective of the Bauhaus was therefore to free the creative artist from his other-worldliness and to bring him back into the workday world of realities; hence the governing conception of the Bauhaus was the "basic unity of all design in its relations to life, which informed all our work."³⁸ And, in his view, only the preliminary courses could fulfill the task, which made this unique education method crucial to Gropius during both his time at the Bauhaus and the subsequent years at Harvard.

36 Gropius 1934: 24–25.

37 Gropius 1943: 20.

38 Gropius 1934: 24–25.

Huang's Pedagogy at SJU

It should come as no surprise that Huang decided to adopt the GSD model after he took up the post at SJU and started to establish the curriculum of the Department of Architecture. As mentioned earlier, architectural education in 1930s China was predominantly a Beaux-Arts system that promoted the institutionalized eclecticism known as the architectural expression of "Chinese modernity."³⁹ As a result, the modernist doctrine that Huang advocated was difficult to popularize, especially given its industrialized aesthetic devoid of any symbolic ornamentation. Yet, Huang believed that the modernist architecture that he had studied in the United States represented the real spirit of the modern movement, thus exemplifying the correct path which Chinese architectural practice should be following.

39 Cody/Atkin/Steinhardt 2011; Ruan 2002.

First of all, it is necessary to point out that Huang created a novel and yet flexible curriculum that was subject to necessary adjustments and updates. As his students recalled, "[the curriculum of] every semester is brand new. The ways that every instructor teaches are also always changing. They never repeat

themselves.”⁴⁰ At SJU’s architecture department, the specific approaches of different professors may have varied, but they shared a pedagogical framework that went hand in hand with the fundamental agenda of the department as a whole. The openness of the SJU curriculum structure reflected Huang’s acceptance of Gropius’s “total architecture” vision. In Huang’s view, the discipline of architecture not only encompasses a myriad of built environments with various scales, but is also “rooted in the entire life of a people,” thus representing “the interrelationship of all phases of creative effort, all arts, all techniques.”⁴¹

With this shared view, the faculty members and students at SJU extended their interest in architecture to the designs of clothes and theater. Huang and his students in 1945 designed and built the set for a play called *Robot* directed by Huang’s brother, the famous theatre director, Huang Zuolin. With a dark backdrop and small light bulbs indicating celestial bodies, the general stage set was intended to produce a sense of unlimited depth of the universe. At the right corner of the stage, they arranged a spiral staircase that connected to an overhanging slab aimed to produce an enclosed space. At the left side, an interesting spatial configuration built with abstract formal components—including strings, corrugated panels, and cantilevered posts—created an in-between space correlating the enclosed space and the expansive universe (fig. 5).

Huang attended the GSD from 1938 to 1941, and therefore did not take “Design Fundamentals,” the GSD version of the *Vorkurs*. Nevertheless, we can still identify in the SJU curriculum and in the interviews with the SJU students many traits of the Bauhaus ideas that Gropius, in an informal way, had successfully managed to integrate into the GSD curriculum:

	<i>Saint John’s University Architecture Curriculum (the 1940s)</i>	<i>Collegiate Architecture Curriculum in the Beaux-Art Context (1939)</i>
<i>Technology</i>	Structure and Design Reinforced Concrete Steel Structure Materials Lab Construction	Construction Reinforced Concrete Carpentry Workshop Steel Structure Materials Lab Construction
	Electrical Plan	Mechanical Ventilation Water Management
		Code and Professional Practice Construction Costs
	Topographical Survey	Topographical Survey

40 Qian/Wu 2012: 49–67.

41 Cf. Huang 1947.

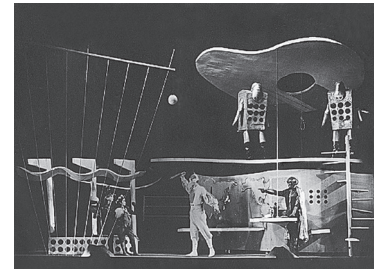


Fig. 5 Stage designed by Huang and the students of SJU for the play “Robot,” 1945

<i>Drawing/Crafts</i>	Descriptive Geometry Engineering Drawing	Descriptive Geometry Shadow Perspective
	Architectural Drawing Pencil and Charcoal Watercolor Model	Freehand Drawing Model Drawing Monochrome Watercolor Watercolor I Watercolor II Wood Carving Sculpture and Pottery Nude Sketch
<i>History/Theory</i>	History of Architecture	History of Architecture History of Chinese Architecture Construction of Chinese Architecture (YingZao-FaShi)
		Arts History Classical Ornament Fresco
	Principles of Architecture Theory of Space Theory of Color Theory of Design	Pattern Theory
<i>Design</i>	Design Studio	Preliminary Pattern Architectural Pattern
	Interior Design	Interior Ornament
	Horticultural Design	Garden Design
	Urban Planning Urban Planning and Thesis	Urban Planning
	Thesis Mandatory Professional Practice	Thesis

One major affinity between the SJU curriculum and Gropius's pedagogical ideas was reflected in their attitudes toward an individual's creative power and the methods to evoke it. For instance, in the above comparison table, based on the recollection of Fan Shupe, one of the earliest graduates of SJU,⁴² it is noticeable that the courses that notably distinguished SJU from other architecture schools in 1940s China were those under the heading of "Drawing/Craft." According to its description, this section in SJU's curriculum was conceived to "cultivate students' imagination, creativity, and ability to convey their ideas through drawing or other available representational tools,"⁴³ an idea that closely conformed to that of the *Vorkurs* at the Bauhaus. Both aiming to stimulate students' potential creativity, the preliminary drawing/crafts courses at both the Bauhaus and SJU were derived from a shared belief of Gropius and Huang.

More importantly, the workload of drawing/crafts courses at SJU was much less than those at other peer institutions in China during the 1940s. According to Fan Shupe, the credits for drawing and crafts took up only less than 5% of the overall requirement, whereas those in Beaux-Arts-based schools occupied at least one-third of the curriculum. The schools following the Beaux-Arts system, in addition to requiring students to take traditional drawing training courses, such as freehand drawing and watercolor rendering, assigned "sculpture and pottery" and "nude sketch" as mandatory. It can be imagined that the difficulties of the drawing/crafts courses at SJU were not comparable to those offered in other architectural departments. Fan recalled further, "The [drawing/crafts] courses [at SJU] were considerably short, mainly focusing on basic skills such as painting daily objects, still including painting daily objects, still life exercises, and occasional sketch practices at a park or on the street."⁴⁴ In addition, the students were not asked to spend much time on the rigorous practice of traditional hand-drawn rendering techniques. At SJU, the aim of these classes was not to make students proficient in drawing skills, but to strengthen their appreciation of analyzing and representing abstract formal elements. Similarly, the Bauhaus *Vorkurs* revolved around intensive exercises focusing on the configuration of abstract elements—dots, shapes, colors, and lines—in conjunction with the principles of balance and rhythm, rather than the usual slavish copying from historical examples—whereas in the Beaux-Arts schools, the training that helped students familiarize themselves with "classical ornaments" and "pattern" were especially important.

In line with Gropius's ideas about the distinction between "knowledge" and "creativity," Huang's approach to teaching design was to inspire rather than transmit. In a talk entitled "The Training of an Architect" that Huang delivered at the British Council of Shanghai in 1948, he stated his strong belief in the creative power of art and architecture in each individual and acknowledged the fact that there are particular types of knowledge, such as "building materials and their proper use," that cannot be acquired from the school.⁴⁵ He also pointed out that there were two aspects of architecture that were transmittable—the knowledge of building techniques and, interestingly, the configuration of architectural space, a topic to which I will return later.

42 Fan graduated from SJU in 1948. For the list of graduates of SJU, see Qian/Wu: 2012: 67.

43 St. John's University Archive.

44 Qian/Wu 2012: 55.

45 Huang, "The Training of an Architect." The manuscript of the talk was in English. Cf. Qian/Wu 2012: 8–14.

In his design studios, Huang encouraged students to begin a project with inquiries, leaving its explicit goal unarticulated. Like Gropius, Huang also believed that a successful teaching pedagogy would effectively stimulate the creative potential of a student. According to Fan, Huang often quoted ancient Chinese philosophers, in particular Mengzi, to support this idea. In “Jin Xin I” Mengzi said:

A great artificer does not, for the sake of a stupid workman, alter or do away with the marking-line. Yi did not, for the sake of a stupid archer, change his rule for drawing the bow. The superior man draws the bow, but does not discharge the arrow, seeming to leap with it to the mark, and he stands there exactly in the middle of the path. Those who are able, follow him.

In his teaching, Huang practiced how the “superior man” teaches archery to his pupils: to be good at guiding others while leaving them to act on their own. Huang’s student Li Dehua, one of the only four students enrolled in the first year of the SJU architecture program after its establishment, described the teaching methods of his professor:

[Huang Zuoshen] opens the door for you, ushering you inside. But he is not your tour guide. Rather, he lets you wander and look around [...]. In this sense, he functions as a tinder, first igniting himself, and then leaving you to light up by yourself.⁴⁶

46 Qian/Wu 2012: 127–133.

Huang tended to provide relatively vague descriptions for studio projects. Other architecture schools, however, were inclined to over-explain design tasks. The descriptions of the studio project from these schools not only specified every space with a particular functional program but also regulated their number and size. Huang, by contrast, simply gave students one sheet of paper on which he wrote one paragraph in English that briefly described the background information of the project and its site. He left specific anticipations for the design to students themselves. According to Li Dehua, students were encouraged to formulate their own project requirements, as long as they had accomplished enough research and, most importantly, had posed valuable questions to be answered through design.⁴⁷

47 Ibid.

A design project with the topic of “weekend house” serves as evidence. Huang gave students only very little basic information, such as what it was like to live in a weekend house and what the difference between a weekend house and a regular house in an urban context was. He scarcely mentioned problems, such as how to maintain the house during the absence of the occupants, the issue of security, and how to empower the house with the capacity for the occupants to feel at home within its varied settings. These aspects later became the main criteria for evaluating students’ design outputs. Furthermore, one of St. John’s graduates, Wang Jizhong, gave a more extreme

case: Huang once left the classroom right after writing only the task title, “A clinic near a waterfront,” on the board, with no further instruction.

The design studios at SJU further exemplified Huang’s acceptance of the Gropius and Bauhaus training methods of observation and representation, with the intent of “showing the desired identity of form and content” and “breaking down conventional patterns of thought in order to make way for personal experiences and discoveries which will enable the student to see his/her own potentialities and limitations.”⁴⁸ Luo Xiaowei, Huang’s student during the late 1940s, once told a story about one of the design projects that Huang assigned. The task consisted only of two English words: “Pattern & Texture” (fig. 6). Without any clue as to how to proceed, Luo accidentally mixed some powder with glue and then spread this paste-like material on the paper in a spiral pattern. Huang looked carefully at her work and did not say much explicitly about how he would evaluate it. After a while, he suddenly spoke: “Look, don’t you now have both ‘pattern’ and ‘texture’?”⁴⁹

Also shown in the table above, another component that was dramatically downplayed at SJU was the history of architecture. There was only one general course in Huang’s curriculum that was intended to survey architectural history, indicating its lack of importance in his consideration. As we can learn from the recollection of Luo Xiaowei:

When I was a student at SJU, we did not put much effort into studying history at all. The western architectural history course was taught by a Hungarian architect named Hajek, who also taught urban planning and interior design and meanwhile worked at his own interior design firm in Shanghai called “Modern Home.” He didn’t use textbooks, just drew a lot on the boards. I considered his teaching was about “historical buildings,” rather than “architectural history,” which to me are two totally different subjects.⁵⁰

According to Luo, the history course at SJU covered only the modern period. She also mentioned in the interview that, when Huang himself was lecturing, he tended to talk about the “four modernist masters” by comparison with modern art and music. Huang, for instance, particularly expressed his appreciation of Gustav Mahler, the Austro-Bohemian composer, whom he most likely knew through Gropius’s connection with Alma Mahler.

Another interesting fact about the history component of Huang’s curriculum was that there was no course introducing Chinese architecture. Rather than being a result of viewing Chinese architectural tradition as insignificant, this arrangement should be understood as Huang’s response to the then dominant research approach of this particular field. Indeed, Huang’s attitude toward architecture differed greatly from that of the Chinese architects trained under the Beaux-Arts system. Specifically, his stance was in opposition to his fellow Chinese scholars, whose research centered on the timber-frame, load-bearing structural system of traditional Chinese architecture. Huang admit-

48 Bayer/Gropius 1938: 26.

49 Interview with Luo Xiaowei.



Fig. 6 SJU architecture student Guo Gongxi next to his “Pattern & Texture” work, 1951

50 Luo 2007: 27.

ted that he was not familiar with the names of the wooden components that were assembled to create the complex, interlocking supporting skeleton. Yet, he expressed his appreciation for the spatial organization of traditional Chinese buildings. His view of Chinese architecture was thus conditioned by the primacy of spatial configuration in his design thinking. Moreover, in Huang's view, it was dangerous to impose the methods and underlying mentalities, which are attainable only for people from particular time periods and particular geographic regions, on the research activities of Chinese architecture. In a talk entitled "Chinese Architecture" that he gave at an event organized by the British Council of Shanghai in 1948, Huang attacked the contemporary research of Chinese architectural culture that resulted in what he called "nationalist movement":

We noticed some very strong nationalistic movement in architecture. This was heralded by the work of some architects in the north, notably the Peking National Library. The research into Chinese architecture so admirably carried out by the Society of Chinese Architecture in Peking was also a great moving force in this new movement [...]. Now the trouble with that structure lies in the fact that the new yardstick employed in the architectural valuation was discovered after expensive research into subject with methods and viewpoint alien to that kind of study. Then where was a kind of rather peculiar mentality? We were, and probably still are, rather impatient with our process [...]. A contemporary Chinese architecture capable of coping with the modern requirement and yet remaining still true to our cultural tradition cannot come about so easily by adopting a Chinese exterior and a western interior.⁵¹

51 Qian/Wu 2012: 25.

The discrepancy between the nature of Chinese traditional architecture and the study method of Chinese scholars during the early twentieth century deserves a separate paper. Nevertheless, it is clear that what concerned Huang the most was the possibility that intensive engagement with architectural history would lead students to formalist anarchy, especially for those who were lacking adequate preliminary knowledge during the years crucial for formulating their own approaches to design. There is no doubt that the inimical feeling about these kinds of history courses came from the influence of Gropius, as the latter had said almost exactly the same thing in the Jonathan Barnett's interview quoted above.

Even though SJU later increased the weight of architectural history in its curriculum as the student body grew slightly, the emphases of these courses were still notably different from other architecture schools. Rather than centering on important buildings in history, they focused on the fundamental historical, cultural, and social context that gave rise to those forms. In other words, the teaching of architectural history at SJU showed more of a tendency toward theoretical engagement than literal historiographic narrative. And this was associated with Huang's affiliation of architecture with the social con-

cerns of his time. When touching on the social responsibility of modern architecture, Huang's tone was undeniably similar to that of his GSD teacher. For instance, with regard to the relationship between architects and the contemporary social reality, Huang directly "borrowed" Gropius's statement in the *Scope of Total Architecture* published in 1943:

Our guiding principle is that artistic design is neither an intellectual nor a material affair, but simply an integral part of the stuff of life, to rouse the creative artist from his out-of-this worldliness and reintegrate him into the workday world of realities, but at the same time to broaden and humanize the rigid and almost exclusively material ways of real life. Thus our conception of the basic unity of all design in relation to life is in diametrical opposition to that of "art for art's sake" and the even more dangerous philosophy from which it sprang from, business as an end in itself.⁵²

52 Huang 1947; Gropius 1943.

Like Gropius, Huang, too, stressed the close connection between architectural design and actual social reality. "Architecture should combine many purposes including function, structure, tools, and material," Huang said. "Architecture also draws inspiration from human and social sources, namely, the technical, aesthetic, social and political relationship with society." He further contended that "architectural education should keep an open mind and a close contact with reality."⁵³ Huang told his students that modern clients had a new set of needs, both functional and spiritual, different from those of any earlier eras. In his speech titled "The Training of Architects," Huang articulated his view of "the most significant change" in today's architectural practice, in particular, the new relationship between the architect and the client:

53 Qian/Wu 2012: 9.

Fundamentally, architecture depends on the client. You cannot have an architecture without first the object for whom the building would be erected; in other words, there is demand and supply; a reciprocal relationship between the client—the use of the building—and the architect. In previous ages, architects often cultivated a small group of clients only, usually of the privileged classes. It is inconceivable today, in the age of democracy, the clients cannot be anything less than the whole people. So today, the most significant change has been the reorientation of the architect's relationship with society. Instead of thinking of himself as a reformer whose job it is to provide the background for society to live in.⁵⁴

54 Ibid.

Huang also believed that design must follow the leads of theory, assuring that design studios run in parallel with courses introducing theoretical ideas that were portable for design projects. As a result, SJU's theory courses were built upon modernist thinking, focusing on the reciprocal relationship between architecture and its time, modern life, as well as social conditions. In the following table intended to explain the "outline of architectural theory" courses, Huang's intention of stressing the social aspect of the "New Architecture" can clearly be seen:

*Outline of Architectural Theory (1949)*⁵⁵

1. Introduction: Architecture with Science, Technology, and Art
 2. History: Architecture with its contemporary context, as well as the value of history to architecture
 3. Our time and life: machine age
 4. Our time and architecture: contemporary artistic view
 5. Architecture with Environment; City Planning with Environment
- Part I: the course introduces the principles of “New Architecture.” From the historical, social, economic bases points of view, the course discusses the fundamental significance of beauty, utility, and stability in new architecture, as well as the goal of “New Architecture.”

Part II: the criticism of cases of “New Architecture,” and the introduction and criticism of modernist architects

Bibliography: *Architecture for Children*,⁵⁶ *Adventure of Building, Towards a New Architecture* (Le Corbusier), *On Architecture* (Frank Lloyd Wright), *A Key to Modern Architecture* (F.R.S. Yorke & Colin Penn), *Space, Time and Architecture* (Siegfried Giedion), *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus, Scope of Total Space of Architecture* (Walter Gropius)

55 St. John's University Archives.

56 I suspect that he is referring to Earl Kelley's *Education for What Is Real* (1947), a required reading for GSD students. Kelley's book was about the extent to which new findings in the nature of perception and knowing based on the research at the Dartmouth Eye Institution in New Hampshire was significant to education. The author saw this book as the basis for formulating an educational scheme for children.

In the bibliography shown in this outline, Huang included books by Gropius, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Siegfried Giedion. It is interesting to see his attempt to expand Gropius's ideas toward implementing those of other modernists. Nevertheless, by aiming both to emphasize the correlation between contemporary architectural practice and the general social context, the SJU curriculum resonated with the objective of the Bauhaus.

Huang's understanding of the driving forces behind modernist architecture also reflected on the difference between the “contemporary” and “the old model” of architectural education. He stated that the problem with the “old model” was that it “approached its problem from without, with preconceived ideas and prescriptions.” Instruction in the architecture of his time, in Huang's view, should try to “find the solution of a problem in the nature of a problem.” He advocated that architectural design must start from the analysis of the problem itself: “Every detailed requirement has to be dealt with; every function must be carried out systematically both as a part and a part of the whole plan that is to be one unity.”⁵⁷

Huang saw “modern” as being not just postclassical, but also up to date. Identifying himself as an ardent proponent of the spirit of “New Architecture,” Huang, according to Fan Shupe, insisted on not using the term “modern” to

57 Qian/Wu 2012: 11.

describe the New Architecture, for the abundant appearance of this term led to its misuse. He was especially against the use of the term “modern style,” as he believed that New Architecture cannot be seen and reduced to another architectural “style.” He pointed out that the term “contemporary” carried a sense of “moving forward,” indicating that “New Architecture” in its real sense had been ever-advancing. Rather than a formal, stylistic language, the “New Architecture” represents a “spirit,” as Huang repeatedly informed his students. As the entrance banner for the SJU Student Work Show 1952 read:

“New Architecture is the architecture that is ever moving forward. It changes itself in accordance with the objective conditions, expressing the progress of human history, therefore not being allowed to stay in a particular historic phase.” (fig. 7)

Conclusion: The “Living” Spirit of “New Architecture”

Thus far, I have explained Gropius’s notion of “New Architecture” as the “total work of art” that reunited all forms of plastic arts. I have also discussed Huang’s acceptance of the “New Architecture” idea upon which his curriculum of St. John’s University Department of Architecture was built. Then, how did Huang understand the spirit of the “New Architecture” that motivated the emergence of the Bauhaus? A simple answer to this question is that, for Huang, it was tied to the notion of “function.” Every time he taught the first class on the general introduction to architecture, Huang would write on the blackboard Le Corbusier’s famous motto, “The house is a machine for living in!”, with capitalized “FUNCTION” on the side. Of course, his understanding of this concept was beyond just designating abstract programs to particular rooms; he considered architectural function as the beginning, rather than the end, of design. In other words, for Huang the functionalist approach to architecture should be considered the principle rather than the means. This attitude, again, reflected the impact of Gropius. In his initial statement in which he emphasized his intention at Harvard, Gropius asserted that he was by no means interested in teaching “style,” but a “method.”⁵⁸ Here, the central concern of Huang’s ideas in establishing SJU’s architecture education is worth quoting in length:

The general policy of the St. John’s School of Architecture is a rejection of such a study of the art of buildings, tinged with so-called “academic” conventions. Instead, students are encouraged to grasp and coordinate formal, technical, social and economic problems with which architecture is unavoidably linked. They are encouraged to create a clear, organic architecture whose inner logic will be radiant and obvious, unencumbered by lying facades and trickeries, in fact an architecture adapted to our world of machines, an understanding and proper use of the machine not a mere slavery-architecture whose function is clearly recognizable in the relation of its forms. Formal problems are studied not as an end



Fig. 7 SJU student work show, 1952

58 Gropius 1937.

59 Huang 1947.

by itself, but derived from the study of structure and function, and their implication on society generally. So, the architectural student is trained as a coordinator whose business it is to unify the various formal, technical, social and economic problems, that arise in connection with building and this inevitably leads to the student step by step from the study of the function of the equipment of the house, from the house to that of the street, from the street to that of the town and finally to the still vaster implications of the regional and national planning.⁵⁹

60 Van der Rohe 1953.

The “New Architecture,” in Huang’s view, is the logical outcome of an understanding of function, of our present age, and of applying technological means on a rational basis so as to create an orderly social background to the task of contemporary living and working. It is fair to say that the Bauhaus is not a given set of stylistic language or a static method of architectural design. Rather, it transcends all of our established conceptions of architecture. It is, as Huang declared, a “living” spirit. As Ludwig Mies van der Rohe said in a speech given on the occasion of the seventieth birthday of Gropius, “The Bauhaus was not an institute with a clear problem, it was an idea, and Gropius himself articulated the idea quite precisely [...] and I believe that the influence the Bauhaus had in the world was due to the fact that it was an idea.”⁶⁰

Huang fully acknowledged the essence of the Bauhaus idea. At the Department of Architecture of St. John’s University in Shanghai, he conducted his experiment with the new architectural education system. Huang’s mission was to train the next generations of architects who were aware of their responsibility to create a meaningful built environment that would be consonant with the concurrent demands of modern life and social reality. The spirit of the Bauhaus for Huang, as well as for Gropius, was that it is subject to potential challenges from the ever-changing social circumstance, analyzing the rising problems, offering new solutions, and adjusting the way people think. This “living” nature was, for Huang, the true spirit of the Bauhaus. In this sense, like Gropius, Huang was also a courageous fighter in the never-ending struggle for the new idea.

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Figures

Figs. 1, 3, 5, 6, 7 Qian Feng.

Fig. 2 Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library.

Fig. 4 Fischer Fine Arts Library Image Collection.

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