

The Coast, Social Actions, and Architectural Production: A Review of *The Social Imperative: Architecture and the City in China*



Chang SU^{1,2,*}

¹ Su Chang Design Research Office, Hong Kong 999077, China

² Department of Architecture, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong 999077, China

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Address: 3/F, Knowles Building, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong 999077, China

Email: changsu@hku.hk

ABSTRACT

Is it possible to intellectually grasp the production of architecture in China over the past four decades? How should we make sense of such an unprecedented transformation of the built landscape in human history? Based on a three-year study by the editor H. Koon Wee, the book *The Social Imperative: Architecture and the City in China* presents a “sourcebook” that gathers multiple entanglements between architecture and society of China’s economic reform era. This review attempts to provide an architectural-geographical perspective for readers to dive into this deep volume of collected essays: the socio-economic rapport between China’s coastal regions and the hinterland. By situating architecture’s “social imperatives” between geographies, this review presents a lateral reading across this multidisciplinary volume of work that would inform both practitioners and the broader audience on understanding the complex forces behind the process of architecture and the city, and contemplating the future role of the architect in, around, and beyond China.

KEYWORDS

Architecture;
Architectural Production;
City;
Society;
Coastal Region;
Hinterland;
Geography;
The Social Imperative: Architecture and the City in China

HIGHLIGHTS

- Reviews a book filled with first-hand stories and critical reflections about the social practices developed by architects and built environment shapers
- Situates an understanding of China’s architectural production and urban transformation through the “coast–hinterland” geographical perspective
- Suggests the need to rethink the role of the architect in China’s future architectural production

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1 Introduction

Despite the long history of architecture in human society, the production of architecture and the city is not a trans-historical phenomenon, common to all societies at all times. They emerge and evolve, prompted by the constant reconfigurations of the infinite forces that shape our built environment. As a result, new forms of architecture and cities are useful distinguishing markers for understanding the complexion of these forces, their geometry, direction, and power. The urban transformation of China in the past few decades has been intensely marked by the production of new architectural and urban forms. This review targets at the book *The Social Imperative: Architecture and the City in China*, in which the editor, H. Koon Wee, juxtaposes theoretical interrogations and “field notes” by practitioners in and around China. This is not only because the types of architecture in question, from rural revitalization to urban mega buildings in China in the past four decades, are relatively new. Rather, it argues that an understanding of architectural production and the shaping of society in China requires more nuanced readings of the socio-economical forces behind it, regarding it as the new ground to speculate on China’s future.

It is no easy task for readers to grasp the full content of the book immediately: it is a thick compilation of Wee’s theoretical analyses followed by short critiques, reflections, and manifestos, affording each of the more than sixty well-known contributing architects and intellectuals the time and space to imagine new social paradigms in China. In other words, the book is filled with first-hand stories and critical reflections about the complexity of the social practices developed by architects and shapers of the built environment. It also presents their struggles and creative responses when facing the need for constant management of discontent and resistance in the process. These juxtaposed stories and critiques are threaded together with Wee’s theoretical portrayal in the opening chapters, with a focus on the parallel stories in “the production of social spaces”^[1].

2 Socio-Economic Tooling of the “Coast”

Before we dive into the specifics of each text, a quick glance through the list of contributors for the book, over 90% of whom are based in or have devoted their practice to China’s so-called “coastal regions,” would give us a first impression of the book. In this case, the idea of “coast” is not necessarily about its natural geography, but a socio-economic concept informed by the Reform and

Opening-up Policy in the past four decades. A historical mapping of key socio-economic policies during China’s reform era might provide a broader context for readers to understand the conditions and motivations of the book.

The literature on contemporary Chinese architecture commonly points to the Reform and Opening-up Policy of 1979 as the beginning of a series of economic policies introduced to different cities and regions in China. One of the key policies was the setting up of Shenzhen, Xiamen, Zhuhai, and Shantou Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in 1980, four coastal cities in Guangdong and Fujian provinces where the business and trade regulations were different from the rest of the country to encourage export-oriented economy. This is also the moment, very often reflected upon, when the social agency of architects in China is said to have been put into question, leaving developers, technocrats, and government officials to deploy the power of development and architects with little to do but design the package of buildings. Several writings in *The Social Imperative* have accounted for these social changes, like the stories collected by Robert Mangurian and Mary-Ann Ray^[2] and Daan Roggeveen’s stories about his journeys going “west”^[3], identifying two parallel movements across the country—that of the workers and of the architects/scholars—during this time.

But Wee’s ambition in the book is not only devoted to explaining this rupture—how the social change could give new architectural form, but also to offer a critical analysis of architecture’s social capacity—how architectural production could in return provoke new forms of social rapport. Since the establishment of SEZs, the cities and major townships around these zones have attracted waves of migrant workers, growing into city clusters in the river delta regions, like the Pearl River Delta and Yangtze River Delta city clusters. The advantage of river delta geography in industrial and post-industrial development is twofold—its relatively flat topography is ideal for the construction of production spaces and infrastructures, and the river mouths offer sites to develop container ports and allow for convenient connection with industrial cities upstream. The rapid development has led to drastic economic growth, and the architectural production in this process would not only satisfy the growing need for space, but also formulate a new social identity for the city.

In the past few decades, the “coast” has presented psychological images of wealth and freedom in Chinese society. Ironically, from the moment it noticed they have the capacity to inform social identity, architecture has felt itself to be in a constant race to keep up with such identity. As highlighted in Ke Zhang, Jiakun Liu, and Li Hua’s short critiques in the book, the competition of form and

“beauty” for architecture in these major cities put architecture in danger subject to the will and desire of power. Having once wished for the status of an alpha dog in the pack of cultural production, the architectural drive was transformed by the coastal–hinterland order into the will to be the perpetual beta.

There are several key recent moments of China’s socio-political “tooling” of the “coast” that are not included in the book, and our mapping here might help “update” and extend it. The Belt and Road Initiative has extended the social implication of China’s architectural production to places beyond its borders since the campaign’s global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013. The “Road” is short for the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road,” the Indo-Pacific sea routes through Southeast Asia to South Asia, the Middle East and Africa, for which major Chinese cities in Fujian, Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Hainan provinces have established collaborations on infrastructure development with Indo-Pacific countries. Another example is the development of the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area, a megalopolis consisting of nine cities and two special administrative regions in south China. With the socio-economic transformation of the region from a “river delta” to a “bay area,” the tooling of urban development in China’s coastal region for the larger socio-economic campaign has also expanded into new socio-economic territories, often beyond the immediate physical limits of the geography. These inter-regional and international campaigns have highlighted architecture’s potential to mobilize political forces across physical and cultural limitations, and the necessity to observe the social transformation through its mediated masses and networked bodies as suggested in Wee’s analysis^[4].

3 Tracing Architecture’s “Social Actions”

How could we trace the forming process of architecture between China’s coastal regions and the hinterland? In *The Social Imperative*, Wee develops a technique by taking advantage of the “core social actions” occurring since the beginning of socialist thought, especially in the form of socialism in the twentieth century. Borrowing the proposition by David Harvey, Wee highlights the socio-transformative nature of architecture, from utopian thoughts to spatial designs, arguing for an understanding of China as part of a longer time-space analysis^[5]. In other words, the coastal–hinterland divide should be understood as a social process, in which architecture plays the dual roles of object and subject. Shu Wang’s discussion about the divorce between architecture’s exterior and its “depleted interior” gives a vivid attempt by Chinese architects

to reestablish architecture’s operative potential in such a process^[6]. The intention is to develop an understanding of both the social behaviors of architecture, as presented through first-hand stories by practitioners in and around the region in the book, as well as the possibility to make sense of such social behaviors through the lens of geography—in this case, the socio-economic conditions between the coastal and hinterland China. This volume of collected reflections would inform both the academia and the broader audience on understanding how the social forms of architecture in China have been shaped, and how we can imagine its new formation with the contemporary social landscape.

These reflections on architecture as social actions and the subsequent discussion on architecture’s “operative nature” present the recent tendency for Chinese architects to look for alternative arenas for a more meaningful domain to operate and perform creatively. For example, instead of fleeing from the gritty and contradictory conditions, Yichun Liu and Jianxiang He separately propose another prominent principle for the aesthetics of contemporary China. Understanding and embracing the industrial legacy in the city, they embrace a design technique that braces the “hinterland-ness” embedded within the coastal cities, transforming the industrial carcasses with relatively low-skill labor into sites for new forms of urban life. In Liu’s work, the messy realities of the city and its industrial necessities continue to figure strongly in his search for dignity in everyday urban architecture.

4 Production of Architecture and the Role of the Architect

The making of architecture and cities in China over the past four decades has been filled with paradoxes. *The Social Imperative* has the benefits of juxtaposing original formulations by architects, urbanists, and scholars working in and around China to give readers a first-hand understanding of the practitioners’ thoughts and motivations beyond actions. These first-hand stories could potentially become the database for a “psychoanalysis” of the whole generation of architects operating in and around China in the past few decades. To fully exploit the potential of such a database, the readers could use some clearer guidance when reading these overlapped subjects and objects portrayed in the texts. This review has presented one possible angle: a geographical reading of the socio-economic conditions between China’s coastal regions and the hinterland as both the context and a thread for the structuring of the book. Wee has also presented several potential dimensions to consider the thick materials presented. For instance, the issues

of labor as raised in Wee’s discussion in the opening chapters^[7], both in terms of its invisibility and the subsequent exploitation, would commonly be traced along with the imbalanced development between the countryside and the city, as well as the subsequent rural-urban migration. But to further examine its implication on the making of Chinese cities, the readers would benefit from a detour towards the analysis of urban villages by Yan Meng, which paradoxically points out that the sense of inclusivity and freedom arising out of the low-resource settlements and self-organized society by migrant workers has proved to be much better-used than most of the formal urban spaces in the city^[8]. These back-and-forth readings between theoretical explorations by the author in the opening chapters and the reflections by different practitioners in the later chapters could provide a more informed analysis and further exploit the potential of the book intellectually.

It is also worth noting that today’s increasingly intensified geopolitics and the race for technological positivism have significantly influenced the way architecture is produced, especially in China. The COVID-19 has in many ways changed our understanding of the boundaries between the social and the biological. Conditioned by these new forms of relationship, the contemporary socio-economic landscape of China has led to new development agendas, like stock land renewal, which intends to capitalize on architecture’s capacity in transforming the existing cities rather than building anew. Yet the social expectations embedded in the original coastal–hinterland logic we occupied still define architecture as a useful tool for the making of society, and architecture’s social potential has become more intensified in these new global landscapes. The real question asked in the book is: what is the role of the architect? And how should we position this role in our new social and architectural landscape?

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海岸、社会行动与建筑生产： 评《社在必行：中国的建筑与城市》

苏畅^{1,2,*}

- 1 苏畅设计研究室，香港 999077，中国
2 香港大学建筑学院，香港 999077，中国

*通讯作者邮箱：changsu@hku.hk

摘要

我们能否客观地思辨中国过去四十年的建筑生产？我们应如何梳理、理解这场人类历史上前所未有的建成景观之变化？在《社在必行：中国的建筑与城市》一书中，编者黄向军从自身历时三年的研究出发，汇集了一份反映伴随着经济改革，中国的建筑与社会多重纠葛的“资料”。这篇书评在建筑与地理的探究视角下——即中国沿海与内陆地区之间和谐发展的社会经济关系——通过分析不同地理形态下建筑的“社会内核”，尝试横向解读这本汇聚了多学科思想结晶的文集，帮助实践者和广大读者了解建筑和城市发展进程背后的复杂力量，为中国、周边地区及其他国家的建筑师应在未来建筑生产过程中担当怎样的角色提供了启发。

文章亮点

- 评述了一本汇集了中国建筑师和建成环境塑造者的社会实践一手资料及重要反思的著作
- 通过“沿海－内陆地区”的地理视角来解读中国的建筑生产和城市转型
- 重新思考建筑师在中国未来建筑生产过程中的角色

关键词

建筑；
建筑生产；
城市；
社会；
沿海地区；
内陆地区；
地理；
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