In search of identity: the development process of the National Grand Theatre in Beijing, China

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The controversial National Grand Theatre in Beijing was completed in 2007. It was the outcome of 50 years’ of perseverance and effort. This long period reflects not only the struggle and balance between global impact and local culture, but also the interactive relationship between social development and architectural practice in China. The National Grand Theatre is no doubt a milestone in China’s modern architectural history. This article reviews its often painstaking route through initiation, design and construction, and discusses the macro-social situation which germinated various schemes in different historic periods. Through the case study of the National Grand Theatre, one can see the factual data of this mega theatre and perceive the characteristics of contemporary Chinese architecture.

Introduction

The National Grand Theatre in Beijing is the most prestigious performing arts centre and largest modern cultural complex built by the Chinese government at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The facility is located in the Tiananmen Square district, the political and cultural centre of China, on the north side of Chang’an Street, with Tiananmen (the symbol of communist China) and the Forbidden City (the symbol of feudal China) opposite, and the Great Hall of the People on the west side (Fig. 1). The main body of the Grand Theatre is a huge oval shell, 212 metres long from east to west and 143 metres wide from north to south, with a height of 46.68 metres, about one metre lower than the Great Hall of the People. The oval-shaped shell design follows a 2.24 prefix super elliptic equation. This spatial structure is made up of 148 arc-shaped steel trusses, covered with about 6,700 sq. m. of French-made ultra-transparent glass and about 30,800 sq. m. of Japanese-made titanium plate. The shell is surrounded by an artificial lake (Fig. 2). All routes to the theatre lobby enter through a glass tunnel under the lake. The main entrance is situated in a sunken square and connects to the surrounding urban space which includes an underground station. The three performing theatres inside the shell are independent, connected only by platforms and bridges. The parking area, stage equipment and entrance hall are in the underground space. The thickness of the 212-metre-span shell structure is no more than 3 metres. The gradual open shape of the glass curtain wall enhances the light and airy feeling of the structure and allows more daylight to penetrate the internal space. The performing space consists of an open space (containing 2,354 seats, with standing room for 135), a concert hall (1,966 seats, with 111 standing spaces), a theatre (1,038 seats) and a multi-functional small theatre (510 seats) (figs 3, 4, 5, 6). The total building area is 172,800 sq.m., with a 46,000 sq. m. underground parking area to serve Tiananmen Square. The site area is 118,900 sq.m. which includes 20,000 sq.m. for buildings, 35,500
sq.m. for the lake and 39,600 sq.m. for landscape and greenery: the remaining area is allocated to roads and urban spaces.¹

In common with many large and important projects, the planning and construction of the National Grand Theatre was conceived over a long period,² involved huge investment and manpower,³ and endured many sensitive, controversial and complicated negotiations. In fact after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the National Grand Theatre was the first big project for which an international competition was held when the public were invited to participate in the planning process. A design scheme from an overseas architect finally won the competition. This result triggered a fierce debate at home and abroad, and impacted heavily on architectural practice and the evaluation system in China. In short, the National Grand Theatre exerted a profound influence on the development of Chinese architecture at the turn of the century.

Figure 1. Master plan of Tiananmen Square.
The controversial National Grand Theatre was completed in 2007 and was the outcome of fifty years of strenuous effort and perseverance. This article reviews the painstaking road to fruition. The five decades embody not only the interaction between global influence and local culture, but also the interactive relationship between social development and architectural practice in China. The National Grand Theatre is a milestone in Chinese modern architecture history. This paper discusses the building design and also the macro-social situation which were germinated in various schemes in different historic periods. By studying the National Grand Theatre in Beijing, one can perceive the main characteristics of contemporary Chinese architecture.

**Exploration at the beginning (1950s): an ‘unbuilt’ design**

In 1958, the Chinese government decided to build ‘the Ten Buildings’ in Beijing to commemorate the
10-year anniversary of the People's Republic of China. The National Grand Theatre was originally one of them. The Architectural Design Institute of Tsinghua University with several other departments finished the preliminary design in 1959. The total construction area of this design was 40,000 sq.m. and included a 3,000-seat theatre and a 960-seat concert hall. The layout and the hall were similar to those of the Paris Opera, which has a U-shaped multi-level auditorium. The colonnade on the front elevation consisted of ten white marble columns with green terracotta capitals. The marble slab floor was bordered with yellow terracotta designed to show contrast in colour and texture. In addition to its basic appearance, the architects used relief sculptures to express ideas which were deeply influenced by the social ideology of that time. In January, 1960, the government commented ‘Adopt this scheme in principle. The location may be better to the west of the Great Hall of the People. The design need not be finished before 1st July, 1961, and should be vetted by the relevant authorities.’ Accordingly, the client and architects modified the design after consulting various experts. The detailed drawings for construc-
tion were finished at the same time as the land excavation. Unfortunately, however, the country suffered from natural disasters in the early 1960s and the scheme had to be postponed (figs 7, 8).

After 1949, ‘achieving modernisation’ was the top priority of the new China. ‘Since a primary source of modernity in China in the past few centuries lies in Europe, processes of “Westernisation” and “modernisation” have been intertwined in complex ways. Chinese architects need to synthesise foreign influence with local traditions in restructuring cities.’5 In the early 1950s, the Chinese government joined the East European bloc and ‘building a strong socialist country’ became top of the political agenda. ‘National form, socialist content’, a slogan from Poland and the Soviet Union, was taken as the guiding policy for the design of governmental and public buildings. This policy was embraced by prominent scholars and architects like Liang Sicheng and Zhang Bo, who had fervently held up the banner of Chinese national form since the 1930s.6 Even with limited resources, Chinese architects never abandoned expressing cultural identity through building style. This attitude dates back to the 1920s. The Dr Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum in Nanjing, designed by Lu Yanzhi (1929), represented the starting point and the ‘Ten Buildings’ of Beijing in 1959 marked the climax of this trend (Fig. 9). The National Grand Theatre was originally one of the ‘Ten Buildings’ and the first sketch design for the building in the 1950s reflected a distinct ‘Chinese architectural style’ (Fig. 10).

In the 1950s, the new China completed its first five-year plan. The rapid economic recovery encouraged ambition. Aid from the then Soviet Union brought not only capital and technology, but also the socialistic design ideas and styles advocated by Joseph Stalin. This architectural movement developed into a ‘national style’ trend in tandem
with the other countries in the socialist bloc. This trend was typically expressed in the ‘Ten Buildings’ when new materials and technology allowed modernist architectural features in space and plan. Actually, these buildings are more about expressing power than fulfilling the needs of the common people. ‘The powerful build because that is what the powerful do.’ It is widely believed that national
confidence can be rebuilt from such monumental architecture, whether in the east or west, past or present. Simultaneously an attempt was made to retain local culture and national style in facades and detailed designs. These factors resulted in memorable external characteristics, such as colonnades and rich decoration. Such an amorphous style composed of modernism, nationalism, revivalism and eclecticism, shows a strong desire for self-identity in China and the world. This was the common expectation not only for Chinese architects but for the whole society. This mentality not only contributed to the first design scheme for the National Grand Theatre in the 1950s, but also led the country into an overwhelming tide of development: the ‘Great Leap Forward’ and then the ‘three-year difficult period’. The sudden demise of the Chinese economy suspended many large construction projects including the National Theatre.

Wandering in the Opening-door Period (1990s): feasibility design

In 1974 while seriously ill, Zhou Enlai, the first Premier of the People’s Republic of China, inquired about progress on the Beijing Library and the National Grand Theatre. Zhou’s unfulfilled wish left a task for his successors and his suggestions played an important role in choosing the site for the theatre. In April, 1986, the government gave permission for the National Grand Theatre to enter the development stage. In February, 1990, the preparatory work group was established. The feasibility study was carried out by the Architectural Design Institute of Tsinghua University, Beijing Institute of Architectural Design and other design companies, with assistance from city planning and technical experts. The group spent three years preparing the feasibility study report which in October, 1993, concluded that the project should consist of three big theatres and a small one, totalling 105,000 sq.m.

The research work on feasibility in the early 1990s can be regarded as the second stage of the National Grand Theatre project. Its main achievement was to find reasons to choose the site west of the Great Hall of the People. The location satisfied urban planning, architectural layout, traffic, pedestrian, environment and height-limit criteria. The new theatre could vitalise the barren area in the heart of the Chinese capital, and change Tiananmen Square into a political and cultural centre. However, because of the limitations of that time, the report had inevitable weak points: underestimating the development of traffic in Beijing; neglecting economic factors; the absence of investigation and analysis on the usage...
rate of existing and future theatres. Although the feasibility study was quite comprehensive, it did not form the foundation for the subsequent international competition at the end of the twentieth century. The location and size of the site, the scale and style of the building changed a lot as the competition progressed (Fig. 11).

In this period, China was continuously seeking direction in a fast-changing world. Actually this revolution began in 1978, when the focus of China moved from political movement to economic development. The reform and open-door policy allowed foreign culture into China along with technology. The architectural market in China ran into a new period similar to the ‘Great Leap Forward’ in the early 1980s. Chinese architects were bewildered when faced with various imported ‘isms’. ‘Against an overall background of designs of mixed qualities, and against a very disparate urban landscape with crude use of icons and forms, there are nevertheless important streams emerging in the 1980s and new currents in the 1990s.’

The speed of design and construction in China attracted worldwide attention. It took only five years for Shanghai to build 2,500 high-rise buildings. This speed outpaced Manhattan in New York City.

The determination to carry out modernisation was manifested in the exponential increase of urban construction. But what architectural language could be used to express this aspiration? In the 1980s and 1990s, most of the municipal leaders and major architects in state-owned design institutes had been trained in the 1940s and 1950s, the so-called ‘second’ and ‘third’ generations of Chinese architects. Their stance was pro-national-form and preoccupied by ideology. In the 1980s and 1990s, building designs along the main streets of Beijing were strictly controlled by the ‘Capital Planning Guidance Committee’, whose mission was to ‘defend the old capital’s traditional flavour’. The result was many traditional ‘kiosk-caps’ on the rooftops of office buildings in Beijing.

At the same time, the eye-catching buildings designed by foreign architects, from the Fragrant Hill Hotel of Beijing (I.M. Pei and Partners, 1982) to the Jianguo Holiday Inn (Clement Chan, 1982) to the...

With the continuous development of the economy, the Chinese people demanded higher material and spiritual standards. In March, 1996, thirty nine members of the Chinese People’s Political Consultation Committee in its annual plenum proposed to re-launch the National Grand Theatre project. In August, 1998, the Shanghai Grand Theatre was completed. This fashionable building, with a GFA of 63,000 sq.m., was designed by Jean-Marie Carpentier et Associés of France and became the focus of attention in China. As the political, economic and cultural centre of the country, Beijing put forward a proposal to build the National Grand Theatre. In December, 1997, seven design schemes were submitted by five design units, including the Beijing Architectural Design Institute and Tsinghua University, which had been involved in the project for forty years (Fig.12).

These designs represented two kinds of concepts among local architects. First, to emphasise harmony with the surroundings: for example, the adoption of a symmetrical pattern with a Chinese-style façade, and secondly, to set a high standard in creativity not previously seen. Most domestic professional judges favoured the former, but the government did not regard the submissions as having sufficiently broken from convention. Some other events in the 1990s influenced the government’s preference. One was the criticism of the Beijing West Railway Station, where a huge Chinese traditional pavilion topped out the station building as a symbol of the ‘gate to Beijing’. It was criticised as being uneconomic with a backward-looking perspective.
The second was the departure of Beijing’s mayor, who had been a firm exponent of ‘national form’. The two events sped up the phasing out of ‘national form’.15

In order to have a first-class international performance venue, the project schedule was postponed until an international design competition was held. Between April and July, 1998, seventeen design companies from China and abroad were invited; an additional nineteen ‘wild card’ entries were received. All forty four schemes submitted by thirty six companies were exhibited to the public in the National Museum at Tiananmen Square. After a full discussion in the first round of competition, five entries were selected. The five selected schemes were designed by ADP (Aeroports de Paris) of France, Terry Farrell & Partners of the UK, Arata Isozaki & Associates of Japan, China Architectural Design Institute, Ministry of Construction and HPP International Planungsgesellschaft mbH of Germany.

As none of the submissions satisfactorily met the required comprehensive standards, a second-round competition was held from 24th August to 10th November, 1998. This time the selected schemes were from ADP, Arata Isozaki & Associates, Beijing Institute of Architectural Design & Research, Tsinghua University and Hans Hollein + Heinz Neumann Design Group of Austria. Based on the suggestions from the jury, the competition committee recommended a collaborative working relationship be established between ADP and Tsinghua University, Terry Farrell & Partners and Beijing Institute of Architectural Design & Research, and Carlos Ott & Associates of Canada and the Architectural Design Institute, the Ministry of Construction of China. Modifications to the site boundaries were also made at this stage. The site was extended to the south and aligned with the central axis of the Great Hall of the People. In the second round, Paul Andreu of ADP abandoned his original design, and created a completely new form. The three finalist entries were submitted to the Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and top political figures picked the winning scheme. Actually, no one knows how this scheme was selected. In August, 1999, ADP was deemed to have won the long competition and the Beijing Institute of Architectural Design & Research was appointed design partner (Fig. 13).

The competition was conducted over fifteen months. The scheme designed by Paul Andreu of ADP, was selected from sixty nine schemes by thirty six companies. The wilful and context-less form of ADP’s design triggered a fierce debate. The first focal issue was the location. Opponents to the proposal thought the location was too close to Tiananmen Square. It was hard for the new theatre to ignore existing buildings such as the Forbidden City and the Great Hall of the People. Moreover, it was felt that there were enough cultural facilities in this area and a new theatre of such a scale should be built in a suburban district rather than in central Beijing. Supporters of the proposal such as Jin Zhishun, the project chief of the National Grand Theatre and Beijing Library, thought the selected site was very good. The National Grand Theatre shows the cultural view of a nation just like a window. It will not only reflect national consciousness and the development of traditional
culture, but also consolidate Beijing as the political and cultural centre. More factors rather than technical matters, such as population and regionalisation, should be considered in the site choice. This theatre is different from the district-level culture facilities.\(^{18}\)

Forty nine academicians from the China Academies of Science and Engineering and one hundred and eight distinguished architects and engineers wrote petitions, which were sent to the central government, asking for a reselection of the chosen design. The opinions included: it was unwise to contain too many functions within this theatre; the oversized construction scale would cost a lot in daily maintenance; the high construction cost would make charges for the use of the theatre and ticket prices too high for most people; the high cost was generated from unreasonable design, which could not be improved. The academicians pointed out: ‘this is not a debate of different schools, but science versus non-science. Architecture demands a design that is practical and reasonable, is economically efficient and respects Chinese tradition and reality’.\(^{19}\) Daniel Derek Ed, columnist for the French newspaper Le Monde, said ‘we shall have to understand Beijing or study architecture in Paris’s Art Academy to realise that this is a big waste of money’. Michael Kirkland, an academician at the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, thought that this building would bring China shame.\(^{20}\) Although ‘sitting in radical juxtaposition with the staid, old, formal political architecture of Tiananmen Square, the National Grand Theatre compels us to turn our gaze from the old Beijing to the new’, ‘the result is that the structure looks less like a source of dreams than a pile of shit—and that, apparently, is exactly how some wags refer to it.’\(^{21}\) Similarly colourful comments were often heard in Beijing’s streets.

Supporters thought that the theatre with its unique form would have a positive impact on the
redevelopment of Tiananmen Square and Chang’an Street. They considered that this innovation in architectural design would become an iconic building which would be a distinguished landmark for Beijing in the twenty-first century. Paul Andreu also replied to these queries. In his opinion, respecting the environment was not equal to copying it, but could involve placing different architectures together to produce a resonance. There were several ways in which to have a dialogue with the surroundings. Imitation was the most primary stage, but was not applicable for buildings of different functions, characters and times.22

There are innumerable articles about the National Grand Theatre, most of them highlighting the performing function of the building, Chinese identity and the Beijing context. The fierce criticism and debate over a building were unprecedented in Chinese history, where open judgement was long absent in a country with a dictatorship. The challenge and criticism mainly came from an older generation of architects and intellectuals, who resented the fact that China had become occupied by an anonymous ‘futurist’ blob. Supporters were from a relatively younger generation, who hoped that the building could bring in fresh air. No matter how well or badly the Theatre was designed, the confrontation reflected the situation at the turn of the century. The old (second and third) generations of Chinese architects wanted to maintain their beliefs and resist global impact, while the fourth and fifth generations were eager to seek a way forward and welcomed new ideas. In this debate, the central and Beijing government’s attitudes coincided with those of the younger
generation, as the paramount leaders were eager to show to the world their ‘pioneering attitude’.

In many defensive contributions, Paul Andreu often cited the Eiffel Tower, the Pyramid entrance to the Louvre Palace in Paris and the Sydney Opera House as symbols which have stood the test of the time: ‘Today, all people agree that Paris would be incomplete without the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre Palace addition’; ‘I try to be open, listen to and understand all these criticisms. I keep silent because I respect those people with a kind heart and intention. Their queries should be responded to with calm and thoughtful answers. I hope that the built theatre can bring part of the answers’.23

Obviously, the project is more than a theatre for China. As Anna Klingmann has said, buildings are not just buildings, but rather iconic symbols that reflect who we are as people, cities and economies in that sense. They represent a ‘brand’ of sorts. A government appreciates mega-structures for specific reasons, such as providing jobs, stabilising society and creating visibility in the global financial market. More importantly, mega-structures can show the power and confidence of a nation. So, one should clarify a problem before debating it: is architecture the purpose or just the means? ‘Current architecture must be assessed by its economic potential to raise the perceived value of its beneficiary, be it a single client, a corporation, or a city.’24

All the criticisms could not shake the determination of Chinese top politicians to build this ‘blob’ building and to declare their ambitions to the world. The National Grand Theatre started construction without publicity in April, 2000, without a ground-breaking ceremony. In response to opposition, construction was ordered to stop three months later. To address the problems, the government solicited opinions on making necessary design improvements. The adjustments reflected comments from the public and changes in the government. Construction restarted in December, 2001, after argument and amendment. It was completed in July, 2007, and the grand opening was on 25th September, 2007 (the Chinese Mid-Autumn Day) (figs 14, 15).

After that date, the architectural debate seemed to subside and people’s interests turned to the performances and dramas within the building. As the highest-level performing arts venue in China, the Theatre staged various forms of performance. Art groups from home and abroad regarded performing in the Theatre as a great honour. Following the grand opening in September, 2007, there were 991 performances in more than one year with the occupancy factor averaging 95%–96%. Although tickets are still expensive for ordinary people, the price is reasonable compared with similar products on the market. According to statistics during the opening season, there were 208,435 tickets below 500 Yuan (US$74), accounting for 72% and 127,215 tickets below 300 Yuan (US$45), accounting for 43.96%.25 Besides the audiences, more than a million tourists visited the building between June, 2007 and January, 2008. The National Grand Theatre provides a public space for the public, but the exclusive shape offers little comfort for visitors and passers-by. There are very few residential neighbourhoods nearby, and bus stops and underground stations are far away: the ample public space around the National Grand Theatre sees few local users.
The colossal shell can be seen even in the Forbidden City and the nearby traditional lanes (hutong). The shining shell obviously dwarfs the splendid historic-heritage buildings and destroys the existing urban fabric.

**Conclusion: rethinking of the National Grand Theatre**

The competition for the National Grand Theatre not only revealed different design ideas of this period, but also reflected different thoughts of the whole society. The location gave the Theatre symbolic significance and made it the cultural icon of modern China. However, the scheme by Andreu pays attention to the comprehensive theatrical functions, but little to the cultural aspects and historical context. To some extent, this competition spotlighted an enlightened attitude rather than just a solution for a building. The National Grand Theatre was the product of a bold initiative to hold for the first time an international architectural design competition in China. The competition designs were shown to the public, greatly inspiring people’s enthusiasm and attention. Following the National Grand Theatre experience, exhibiting entry schemes became a normal method of public participation for other international design competitions: for example, the planning of Zhengdong New District in Henan Province (2001) and the design of a national stadium for the Olympic Games in Beijing (2003). However, this kind of ‘public participation’ is still questionable. First, the public’s opinions are not taken seriously and the selection criteria are not transparent. Secondly, public participation is centred on debate about form and meaning: the rationality of a proposal and its real usage are rarely queried. Therefore, the public is actually denied the right of evaluating the quality of public building and space.

The National Grand Theatre design competition undoubtedly played a major role in promoting the image of Beijing as a market opening to the world. The competition somehow reflected the changes in Chinese society brought about under the reforms initiated in 1978 and also enhanced the impact of globalisation on local culture. The debate around the Theatre design was fierce and overt, unthinkable in Mao’s time. However, the process of decision-making is still unknown to the public. The debate did not yield a significant result. In the 1950s, there was discussion on development strategies for Beijing, when Liang Sicheng and Chen Zhanxiang’s proposal to move the administrative centre westwards was not adopted: Beijing lost its feudalist layout formed over hundreds of years. In the ensuing debate on ‘national form’ and ‘big roof’, the proponents of ‘national form’ represented by Liang Sicheng were defeated by the more monumental form typified by the Soviet Union style. Similarly, the National Theatre triggered a sensitive debate about national form and foreign culture, and finally adopted a form with little concern for surroundings and traditions. The Theatre itself is laden with too much cultural meaning and expectation, difficult to achieve extensively. In all these debates on Chinese identity, traditional culture eventually retreats. The dual characteristics of modern Chinese architecture always co-exist: insistence upon but lack of confidence in traditional culture; doubts about but reliance on foreign culture.
The National Grand Theatre epitomises not only modern architectural history but also social development in China. In the fifty-year history of developing the National Grand Theatre, we see the internal relationship between the ‘three stages’ and the ‘three traditional revivals’. Some scholars regard the ‘three traditional revivals’, based on three kinds of attitudes to traditional and social backgrounds, as the main thread in Chinese modern architectural history. The first traditional revival, around the 1920s and 1930s, took Chinese traditional culture as a skeleton and used the Beaux-Arts neo-classical architectural style as clothing. The second traditional revival of the 1950s took Beaux-Arts practice as the norm and used modernism as an expression of internationalism. The third traditional revival of the 1980s took modern architectural thinking as a base and used postmodernism as a means of expression. These three revivals were directly or indirectly encouraged by government’s ideological and political views. ‘National form and socialist content’, highly regarded by the Communist government after 1949, was a Chinese version of the Beaux-Arts tradition, which is, theoretically and emotionally, connected to Haussmann’s Paris and L’Enfant’s Washington Mall practice. Such a ‘grand’ style can readily be found in Hitler’s Germany, militarist Japan in the 1930s, Stalin’s Soviet Union in the 1950s and later in the communist regimes of North Korea and Romania.

The first design scheme for the Grand Theatre in the 1950s was an extension to the exploration of ‘the Chinese architectural style’, which began with the mausoleum for Dr Sun Yat-sen designed by Lu Yanzhi in 1928. The first national theatre scheme along with the ‘Ten Buildings’ of the 1950s marked the climax of the second tide of ‘national form’ revival. Although the goal of these designs could be summarised as ‘using the past to serve the present and using foreign ideas to serve China’, architecture is not a descriptive language used just to build but a physical reality. The first scheme did not embody the development of traditional culture nor ‘the first tide of national form revival’. Limitations in the prevailing aesthetic, political ways of thinking and stringent budgets frustrated the realisation of the theatre in the 1950s.

From the early 1960s to the 1990s, China underwent fundamental changes from the disastrous ‘cultural revolution’ to the economic reforms, sometimes referred to as a ‘Renaissance’ in ideas and social life. In the 1980s, the cry to ‘recapture’ Chinese national form was heard loudly for several reasons. First, in traditional cities like Beijing and Xian, placing eye-catching pavilions on the top of buildings was an attempt to ‘face-lift’ monotonous matchbox-shaped buildings. Second, the ‘national form’ as a design method strengthened the ‘local identity’ and directly harvested tourists’ money. The feasibility study for the National Theatre appeared at this period: its mixed approach aroused parochial feelings which led to an extreme expression of tradition.

However, this style petered out in the late 1980s and was followed by an influx of foreign influences as evidenced in the boom towns of Pudong and Shenzhen, and around the Pearl River Delta.
Undoubtedly, there was an urgent need for redirection in Chinese architecture and the National Grand Theatre triggered a battle between traditional and modernist attitudes: the international competition and subsequent events reflected the impact of the globalisation process on local culture in China. In parallel with the construction of the National Grand Theatre, the new generation of Chinese architects received domestic and international recognition for their designs, and written and exhibited works: for example, Yung Ho Chang, Ma Qingyun, Liu Jiakun, Pu Miao and Zhang Lei. Private practice dominated the design industry, with newly formed design companies serving powerful private developers: this emerged especially after the mid-1990s when the market economy was implemented in China. Trained after 1978 in China and abroad, this generation focused on design and construction language, instead of ideological meaning. Most of them imitated the language of trendy international design in their building practice and education. They may support or object to the design of Paul Andreu’s National Grand Theatre, but the landscape of Chinese architecture in 2007, when the Theatre was completed, was really different from that of 1998 when the design competition for the National Grand Theatre was started.

‘Mega-structures’ in China is a term which refers to recent large public buildings in Beijing and other major cities, and has the following characteristics: huge scale, high cost, far-reaching influence and unique image. The buildings which result from these characteristics often become the icon of a region, symbols of an age and topics of discussion. Most of them are designed by foreign architects or Chinese-foreign joint ventures. Although these mega-structures arrived in China with the rapid development of the economy, they stem from the interactions of globalisation and local awareness. The eagerness for recognition in contemporary China is reflected in two considerations. First is the hope that Chinese culture will be identified by the world, and second is the hope that personal aspirations will be acknowledged by society. Meanwhile, external factors created a fertile environment for the introduction of a generation of mega-structures. Although the communist political ideology has been weakened, its adaptive qualities allowed other means, such as economic policy and cultural guidelines, to support a unique mode of production.30

These qualities are manifest in architecture, where the grandest monumental buildings symbolise political significance, and outweigh any other factor. The buildings, especially large public monumental buildings, depend on allocation and usage of social resources. Therefore, mega-structures stand for the political judgement of a nation in an era, just as culture or works of art do. In Chinese architectural practice, ‘political factors actually represent cultural and psychological needs. It is community behaviour rather than merely individual behaviour’.31 If we take the case of Beijing, ‘apparently, Beijing is probably the ideal city to create public space in the world, for it has a history of sacrificing individual consciousness for the apotheosis of collective consciousness. History has made individual consciousness turn into national consciousness, which has made architecture the symbol of will by diagrammatical urban planning and architectural...
design in Beijing. As a result, mega-structures made by international advanced technologies with ‘Chinese characteristics’ have become the most important feature of contemporary Chinese architecture in the twenty-first century.

The National Grand Theatre project has sparked a discussion in Chinese architectural practice. After the competition for the National Grand Theatre, many cities in China embarked on large theatre-building projects without proper consideration for actual local needs. According to a rough estimate, there were over thirty theatres to be built, being built or completed in 2009. Even a town with a population of 400,000 built a grand theatre of 2,000 seats. The National Grand Theatre gave a great boost to the construction of mega-structures in Beijing: the CCTV headquarters (designed by Rem Koolhaas in 2002) and the Beijing National Stadium, the ‘Bird’s Nest’ (designed by Herzog & De Meuron in 2003), to name just two. Most of these theatres and mega-structures are designed by foreign architects. China has gradually become a showcase and laboratory for architects worldwide.

It took fifty years for the proposal, site choice, competition and construction of the National Grand Theatre to come to fruition. The lengthy and complicated development process as well as time-consuming arguments during conception reflected the development of China in several social stages: this theatre epitomises the modern history of Chinese architecture. As the designer Paul Andreu writes in the preface to his book, ‘I hope the grand theatre, surrounded by gardens and pools, will be a mirror, in this mirror, you will see the future of China, the image and beauty. Please take good care of it, for beauty is needed by every one of us.’

Illustration credits
Pictures 7 and 8 from Zhou Qinglin, ed., The National Grand Theatre (Tianjin, Tianjin University Press, 2000).
Pictures 5 and 15 (a) are by Fu Xing.

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Notes and references
2. The competition was held in April, 1998, the construction started in April, 2000, it was finished in July, 2007 and opened to the public on 23rd October, 2007.
3. The total investment officially published was around 26.88 billion Yuan (3.55 billion US$): this figure does not include a lot of materials and facilities ‘donated’ by various factories in China.

6. Liang Sicheng was in the first generation of Chinese architects who studied architecture in the University of Pennsylvania in the 1920s. After returning to China, Liang chaired architecture at the Northeast University in Shenyang. Later, he and his wife Lin Huiyin joined the China Institute of Architectural Research, whose mission was to survey, investigate and document traditional Chinese architecture. In 1946, he established the Department of Architecture at Tsinghua University and lectured at Yale and Princeton Universities. His English manuscript *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture*, written in the turbulent war time, was taken to the USA and thus escaped a series of political storms in Liang’s motherland. After many years of tribulations, the book was published by The MIT Press in 1984, twelve years after Liang’s death. See Denis Twitchett and John King Fairbank, eds, *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978) and Wilma Fairbank, *Liang and Lin: Partners in Exploring China’s Architectural Past* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).

Zhang Bo was an architect at Kwan, Chu and Yang, the largest Chinese architectural firm in the 1930s. A lot of designs from the firm emphasised the Chinese style. Zhang played a pivotal rôle in the planning and design of Beijing in the 1950s.


11. The first generation of Chinese architects appeared in the 1920s, the second generation in the 1940s, the third generation in the 1960s. Each generation usually spanned around twenty years. Their attitudes and design methods are quite different. See Yang Yongsheng, *Zhongguo sidai jianzhshi [Four generations of Chinese Architects]* (Beijing, China Architecture and Building Press, 2006).


15. The ‘National Form’ in Beijing is sometimes interpreted as ‘Capital Form’ in design practice.


17. Rumours are not reliable, but provide a political landscape and climate for China. For example, the China-France relationship and the Chinese leaders’ stance in...

18. Interview with Jin Zhishun, project chief of the National Grand Theatre, by one of the authors, 15th May, 2009.

19. See Reference 12 above.


26. For the three traditional revivals in China in the twentieth century, see Chapter 2 ‘National Form and Chinese identity: burden or chance?’, in Charlie Q. L. Xue’s book, Building a Revolution, op. cit., and also Peter G. Rowe and Seng Kuan, Architectural encounters, op. cit.


29. For the history of twentieth-century China, see Jonathan D. Spence, The Search for Modern China (New York, Norton, 1990).


31. Interview with Jiang Wei, the Chinese chief architect of the National Grand Theatre, by one of the authors, 21st January, 2009.


33. A ‘grand theatre’ is usually built together with a city library, concert hall, city hall and convention centre in a new town centre as part of governmental ‘image building’ projects. This is particularly popular in those prosperous towns in the Pearl River Delta and Yangtze River Delta in the twenty-first century. Carlos A. Ott, Jean-Marie Charpentier and Paul Andreu have won several designs. The authors have visited and investigated most of these cases.

34. Paul Andreu, The National Grand Theatre (Dalian, Dalian University of Technology Press, 2008), Preface.