

## Ephemeral China/Handmade China

Xing Ruan

I must warn the reader at the outset that this short essay, though it attempts to gain some understanding of China's rapid urbanisation and its resultant architectural 'flowering' in the past two decades, does not exclusively discuss urban problems. On the surface only the first half of the essay is related to the topic, which I call 'ephemeral China'; the second half, which is given the subtitle 'handmade China', goes beyond the disciplinary bounds, however, to touch upon a Chinese temperament. By coining it *handmade*, both as a literal matter and in its literary manner, I hope I have depicted a different China, one that is not quite visible, and yet enduring. At the risk making an unfashionable prediction, this China will inevitably ensure that the current boundless explosion of urbanisation in the country, or for that matter in other parts of the globe, is but a 'temporary historical detour', for the handmade, as the latter part of this essay suggests, does not happen to be a Chinese cultural specificity.

I cannot avoid a biographic undertone in the preamble since I grew up in China in the second half of the twentieth century. But the risk of using one's personal experience to wrestle with an academic problem is that I may give the reader too high expectations, which I cannot possibly match – that is, an inside knowledge of China. Before I show you a glimpse of China via my personal and biased viewfinder, let me briefly comment on this. I must confess that I possess no inside knowledge. My knowledge of China, I should like to think, is no different from that of my readers, which is not

necessarily gained from within. This is a point to which I will return later. When I left China in 1991, at the age of 26, I had never been interested in the country, and was only hungry to know more about the West – the so-called outside world that I never had opportunities to venture into until that point. Soon after I left China, I was immediately under pressure to be Chinese in the post-modern West. Ethnicity and place-identity were buzzwords from highbrow cultural circles to the popular media; I was once again left in despair, for I realised that I knew very little about my own culture. What you will read in the following does not carry the sort of cultural specificity that is often promised by a specialist, not only because it is not inside knowledge, but also that it is not based on the social-science method of relying on socio-economic data (though I do have a few statistics). Rather they are personal observations of events and on literature, and are therefore neither laudatory nor critical, but are narratives as seen by an individual and portrayed with love and irony. I did, after all, spend the first 26 years of my life in China. Much of the story, needless to say, is from within my own professional bounds, that of architecture, which seems to represent a visible China that is no longer interested in the handmade, neither literally nor metaphorically. But, as the story goes, this impression may not reflect the true China. So please bear with me.

### Ephemeral China

Firstly, I would like to present the reader with a China that is now all too familiar: a vast country in a fren-

zied state of economic boom and potential social instability, most vividly represented in its architectural and urban developments. I hope I will convince you that this China is ephemeral. A quite different China, perhaps not so visible as its new buildings and cities, is metaphorically 'handmade'. I should also like to extend the meaning of the handmade to the more stable and longer lasting attitudes towards social life, and even mortality. My sources for this second China come partially from literature.

Let me begin with a brief background story regarding my recently published book *New China Architecture*,<sup>1</sup> which may just serve the purpose of presenting this first China. Although I am not a China specialist (in fact I never aspired to be any kind of specialist), the appeal for writing such a book is obvious: I have always felt that there has not been much Western discourse on China's architecture in the twentieth century.

The situation has, along with the construction boom, changed of course since the mid 1990s: mainstream Western architectural journals and galleries have been racing to expose new architecture in China; celebrity Western architects (including some Dutch architects) have been winning major commissions in China. The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games is one example: all the major buildings have been won by international architects. The swimming complex (which is printed on the cover of my book), the so-called Water Cube, for example, has been won and designed by Sydney-based architectural firm PTW, Arup Group's Sydney office in collaboration with China State Construction Engineering Corporation. In fact, most of the recent major public buildings and infrastructure projects in China have been commissioned to architects and engineers of international renown.

There have been two typical responses to such architectural and urban frenzy. One, quite expectedly, is what I call an ecstasy of glorification: after

more than half a century of stagnation, China is now able to achieve what the West saw in the twentieth century, but only bigger and better. China hence is where the action is, and the twentieth-century cry of 'Go West' should now be turned into 'Go East in the Twenty-First Century', as the celebrity Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas has repeatedly reminded us.<sup>2</sup> One is surely tantalised to learn more from Koolhaas about what exactly is his venture in China, other than turn a high-rise building – China's Central Television Tower in Beijing – into a Möbius strip, which contributes to a city centre that is increasingly becoming a gigantic sculpture garden, packed with isolated architectural objects in a gymnastics contest.<sup>3</sup>

Two, the response has been tinted with a sense of despair. The sheer quantity and speed of China's development, as evidenced in architecture and urbanization, causes an 'unbearable lightness of being' (to paraphrase Milan Kundera). Hence, the tone of newspaper articles in the West makes us sit up: the dust from the Chinese construction sites will eventually reach our shores... A cartoonist's collage of three mega cities – Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou – offers a glimpse [fig. 1]: iconic buildings, most of them newly built in the past decade, plus a few old ones, from each city are juxtaposed together with only an elevated freeway to separate them. The scene is, on the one hand, compellingly real, for each city, and its buildings, are easily recognizable. Yet, on the other hand, it is surreal, as if the buildings in these cities were displayed like animals in a zoo. My sense is that anyone who sees this three-city collage would smile, but one does not quite know how to react to it; what at first may seem to be amusing could quickly turn into a slight sense of melancholy. Not only intellectuals, but also capitalists, would worry at some point about this 'unbearable lightness of being' caused by an architectural-zoo contest that may lead towards a drain on our limited environmental resources, and subsequently to an uncontrollable and monstrous

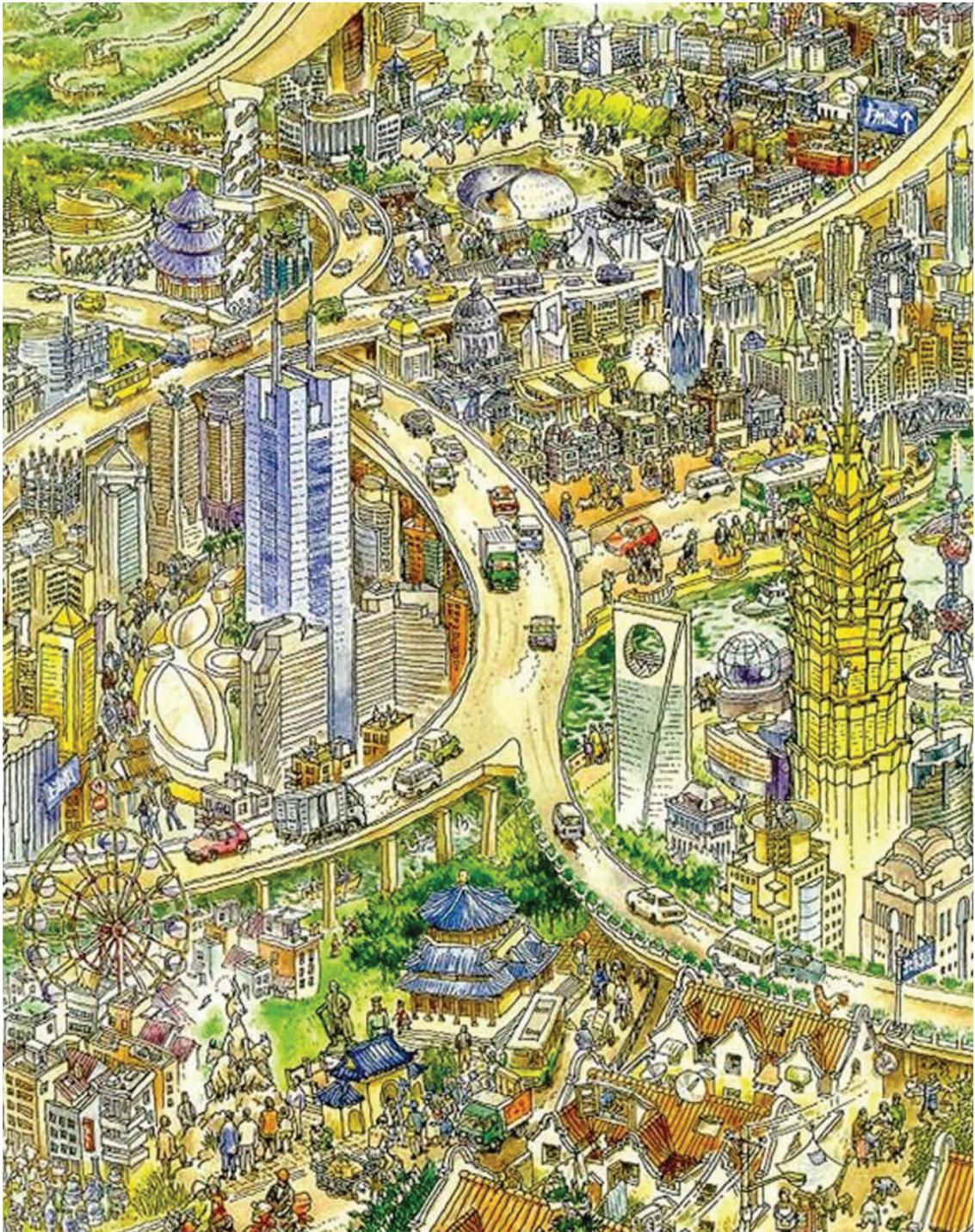


Fig. 1 'Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou', by Wang Fangji, from *Time + Architecture* (Shanghai: Tongji University, 2002-03)

explosion.

To compound this speculation, we need only look at a few statistics: Shanghai, a city with a population of 20 million, has more than 2,800 high-rise buildings that are above 18 storeys; there are approximately 2,000 more of these buildings about to be constructed. China's current total expenditure on building construction is about 375 billion U.S. dollars, which count for up to 16% of the country's total GDP. From a global perspective, China now consumes 54.7% of the world's total cement production, 36.1% of the steel and 30.4% of the coal production. As for future statistics, we need only consider the scale of China's urbanization in the next 20 years; there will be 200 million farmers moving from the countryside to the cities.<sup>4</sup>

But what would be even worse for the intellectuals is that this splendid built world may be achieved at the expense of a potential collapse of the moral edifice. What then is the good? In the sense that Iris Murdoch would have put it.<sup>5</sup> We tend to assume that this sort of 'delirious lightness' (more than Kundera's 'unbearable lightness'), caused mainly by the sheer speed and quantity of urban and architectural progress, is unprecedented. But let us pause and look into history: In late-medieval France, collective pride led to foolish competitions for the tallest vaults or spires, disregarding the laws of engineering, hence the collapse of a cathedral vault that had soared 157 feet, 3 inches. 'Pride', says Yi-Fu Tuan, 'is the deadliest sin. In raising religious edifices, the architect-engineers and their patrons demonstrated how easy it was to mask pride under the claim of glorifying God.'<sup>6</sup>

There is, of course, no God to be glorified in twenty-first-century China, rather only capital and national pride. After more than three decades of ideological battles with the West, and a stagnant state-controlled economy, the economic development in the last twenty years means, first and

foremost, a long-overdue affluence that is much needed in order to sustain stability for the life of the individual as well as the state, since the astronomical levels of affluence and technological development in the West have become much desired. The scale of economic development can best be measured by China's urbanization and building construction. Does all of this then suggest that China, as solidified in its buildings and cities, is no longer 'handmade' in the sense that memory and a sense of history are redundant (particularly for a country that has a recorded history going back more than 5,000 years, which happens to have been so lovingly recorded in handmade artefacts; buildings and cities included)? Hence there is no such need to resort to handmade objects, ranging from a grandmother's jade bracelet, a fifteenth-century solid-wood chair, a family house of three generations, to Beijing's city wall which dated back to the thirteenth century. Yes it is true that the Chinese, unlike Europeans, have always, and rather unsentimentally, demolished their buildings and cities when a new dynasty was established. The much-accelerated demolition of the country's architectural heritage in the last two decades is nothing new. Here I must share with you this compelling story of the demolition of the gigantic handmade city wall in the middle of twentieth-century Beijing.

In the early 1950s, driven by a self-imposed mission to revitalize China's pre-modern architecture, and indeed mixed with an optimism for the new Communist government, the US-trained Liang Sicheng, China's pre-eminent architectural historian and architect in the twentieth century, along with his UK-trained colleague Chen Zhanxiang, proposed building the new government administration district outside of old Beijing to the west, thereby saving the integrity of the imperial city. The idea was rejected by an impatient government and future-orientated technocrats, both of whom wanted to expand Tiananmen Square into the world's largest, and to build grand-scale monumental buildings within the

Ming and Qing city fabric. As a last resort, Liang Sicheng hoped that the least the new regime could do was to save the magnificent city wall (dated back to 1264 CE when the Yuan dynasty began to build its imperial capital) by turning it into a civic park for the leisure time of the citizens of the new era [fig.2]. Indulging in his hopeless romanticism, Liang Sicheng wanted to give the new republic's capital a splendid 'green necklace' of almost 40 kilometres (actually 39.75), by greening the city wall that had enclosed imperial Beijing with lawns and plants. This would be the world's only city-ring-park in the sky; it was not only to be a civic place, but it would also serve the fine Chinese habit of 'climbing high to inspect the horizon'. I would like to think that generations of future citizens could have been cultivated with an acute sense of civic idealism if the proposal had materialized, for the idea of civic life and place rarely existed throughout the many thousands of years of China's imperial history. Who then would care about its hybrid kitsch look? It would look, if anything, heroically cosmopolitan, and yet handmade.

Legend has it that Chairman Mao Zedong, at the birth of the new republic, stood on the Tiananmen – the Gate of Heavenly Peace, while facing a sea of red flags, he imagined a forest of tall industrial chimneys with black smoke coming out of them on Beijing's horizon. Liang Sicheng was devastated! The government went ahead and tore down the entire city wall to make way for roads and subways – the symbol of industrialization, and indeed modernity. This essay is of course not the place to ventilate any bitterness; I tend to think that Liang Sicheng's fate, dying in solitude and regret, is not merely the result of the brutal regime during his lifetime, but also of the image of modernity which has made the idea, and the essence, trivialized.

Indeed the image of modernity, not the idea, has been taken to a new height as a 'beauty contest' in architecture, which denies the profound meaning of

the handmade, that of a stable shell which offers comfort to life's elusiveness, be they the grandmother's jade bracelet or Beijing's ancient city wall. In stark contrast, the China Central Television Tower, designed by Rem Koolhaas as earlier mentioned, as well as the Olympic projects in Beijing, which are all under construction or nearing completion at the time of writing, seem to capture a moment of joyful explosion, like that of fireworks, yet are frozen in a static structure. The irony is that all these new visual spectacles in architecture may appear ephemeral, but they are not! They are static and very expensive structures. Worse still, these buildings, though still largely handmade, are prone to fashion and technological advancement,<sup>7</sup> hence they may look embarrassingly out of vogue before long as they become dated. But how is it possible to represent a state of ecstasy in the man-made artefact, buildings included, against the primordial meaning of the handmade? A mental state of ecstasy never lasts for too long! The true meaning of the handmade, which absorbs labour – 'the honour of labour' as Joseph Conrad lovingly put it in *The Mirror of the Sea*,<sup>8</sup> as well as memory, like that of home, is a static artefact, which harbours our changing emotions, the frailties of human life, and indeed, the growing awareness that comes with time of our own mortality: the handmade offers the necessary enshrinement of life's vulnerability. Let me reiterate yet again my risky prediction: that the seemingly fast-changing China, as represented in its new architecture and city forms, as well as in its frenzied urbanization and booming economy, is but a smoke screen. It is, in other words, ephemeral. The other China is, or has to be, handmade.

### **Handmade China**

In the 1930s, the Chinese author Dr Lin Yutang was astonished to find that the biggest sin in American life was efficiency and the relentless chase for success, hence change: 'How busy the successful American men are!' he sighed. He then wrote a book, entitled *The Importance of Living*, to tell the

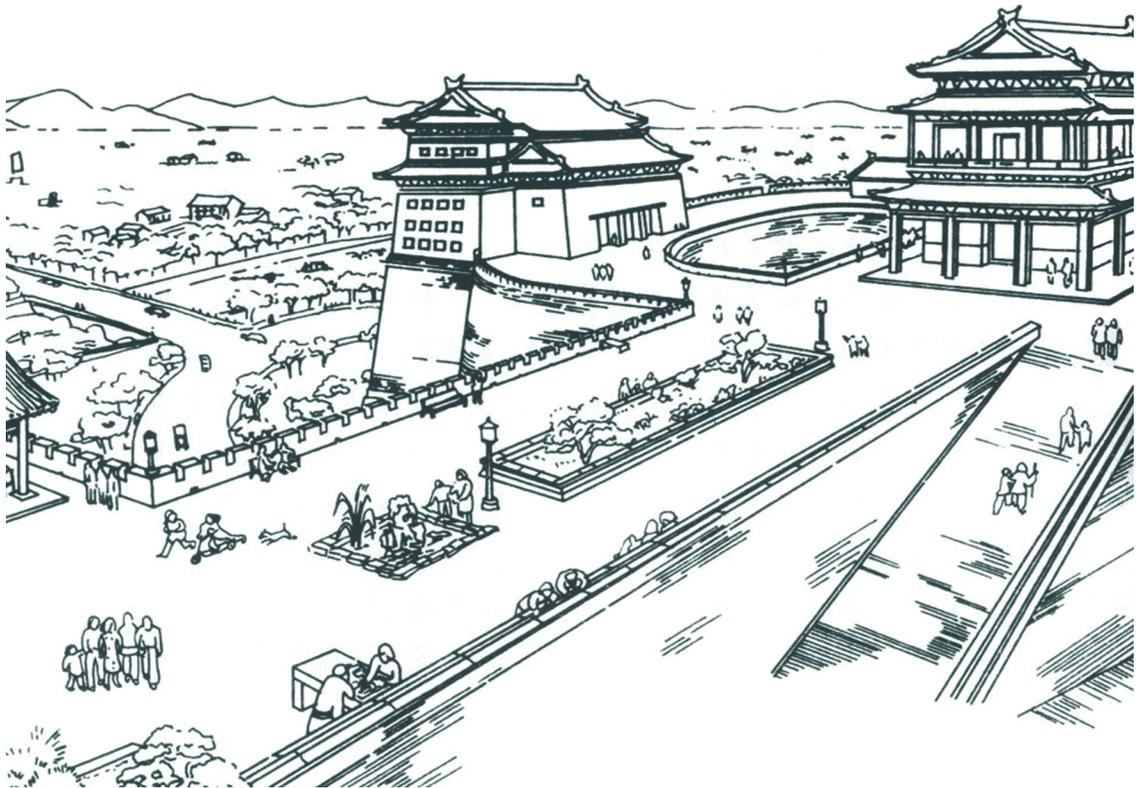


Fig. 2: The city-wall-park proposed by Liang Sicheng, 1951. From Wang Jun, *Chengji* (Beijing: Shenghuo, Dushu, Xingzhi, 2003), p. 110.

Americans that the wiser mentality towards life is to have a perfectly useless afternoon spent in a perfectly useless manner (I should add here: better still, to have a beautifully handmade, but useless, thing to fumble with). In other words, the scamp is the ideal; one ought to become idle, a loafer, so that one can take time, slowly, to savour and marvel at life and its beautiful things.<sup>9</sup> A large part of that life is contributed to by the handmade, which, as alluded to earlier, absorbs not only body sweat, but also stores memory through a stable shell. Consider the lingering voice of your grandfather in a house owned by your family for three generations. The idle mentality, according Lin Yutang, is like blood in the Chinese temperament. It is an artistic temperament that is part realism, part idealism, but a little wayward, a little incalculable, and with good humour. This is the reason why China never produced serious philosophers, but the Chinese are philosophic with free spirit. Such temperament is in stark contrast to the rationalised, disciplined, regimented, uniformed, and patriotic coolies. Again I should like to add that the free spirits ('monkeys' as Lin called them) need the stable handmade objects to calm their elusiveness, whilst the rationalised 'cows' need an ever-changing world of economic forecast and terrorist threat.

One of the American vices, Lin Yutang observed, is that they have to pick up their mail from the post office everyday and answer those letters promptly. 'On the whole,' Lin said, 'if one answers letter promptly, the result is about as good or as bad as if he had never answered them at all. After all, nothing happens, and while one may have missed a few good appointments, one may have also avoided a few unpleasant ones. Most of the letters are not worth answering, if you keep them in your drawer for three months; reading them three months afterwards, one might realize how utterly futile and what a waste of time it would have been to answer them all.'<sup>10</sup> At this point, I can't help saying this to his lingering free spirit in the Heaven: how about emails, Dr Lin?

What then did the Chinese loafers spent time on if they did not answer letters? Lin Yutang translated in his book the thirty-three happy moments described by the seventeenth-century Chinese scamp Chin Shengt'an, who was also the author of the famous play 'Western Chamber'. Some of the happy moments may be a little unbearable for our moderns living in a clinically hygienic world. Chin for example said: 'To keep three or four sports of eczema in a private part of my body and now and then scald or bathe it with hot water behind closed doors. Ah, is this not happiness?'<sup>11</sup> Forgive me for this wayward sally. Let me return to the handmade and happiness. Three of Chin's thirty-three happy moments are worth quoting fully:

*To find accidentally a handwritten letter of some old friend in a trunk. Ah, is this not happiness?*

*When a good piece of old porcelain is broken, you know there is no hope of repairing it. The more you turn it about and look at it, the more you are exasperated. I then hand it to the cook, asking him to use it as any old vessel, and give orders that he shall never let that broken porcelain bowl come within my sight again. Ah, is this not happiness?*

*A traveller returns home after a long journey, and he sees the old city gate and hears the women and children on both banks of the river talking his own dialect. Ah, is this not happiness?*<sup>12</sup>

The mellowness and static nature of the handmade provided, albeit metaphorically, a *home* for the happy-go-lucky and vagabond-spirited Chinese. The meaning of a home, architecturally as well as symbolically, must be handmade to last, to age, and most importantly, to stay the same. Without a home, Gaston Bachelard warned, a man is a dispersed being.<sup>13</sup> The handmade is symbolically a home! 'It is evident anyway that the Chinese as a nation are more philosophic than efficient,' so Lin Yutang argued, 'and that if it were otherwise, no nation

could have survived the high blood pressure of an efficient life for four thousand years. Four thousand years of efficient living would ruin any nation.<sup>14</sup>

But how ironic is this: in just more than half a century, it is now possible to envisage that some Americans may wish to spend a long and leisurely afternoon lying on the grass under a big tree to have a picnic, and to listen to children's laughter and birds' singing; writing from Sydney surrounded by sparkling waters, I note that many Australians do spend long and leisurely afternoons lolling on its Bondi Beach. When the waves of Chinese tourists come to pay their whistle-stop visit to Bondi, this time they are the ones who sigh: How lazy the Aussies are! While still clad in business suits, they quickly take off their shoes, sink into the warm sands, take a dozen digital shots, and off they go...

By now the reader must have realised that Joseph Conrad, Gaston Bachelard, Iris Murdoch, and Milan Kundera are in their temperament very Chinese, or to be precise, they are the kindred spirits of a Chinese idleness that lasted until very recently. Kundera actually wrote a novel called *Slowness*; Lin Yutang sounds all too familiar as Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*. Perhaps this has nothing to do with any Chinese specificity. Yin Yutang at the outset of his book *The Importance of Living* had this to say: 'But I cannot help feeling that this view of life is essentially true, and since we are alike under the skin, what touches the human heart in one country touches all.'<sup>15</sup> Let me now return to the point that I made at the beginning: whether or not I have inside knowledge about China is beside the point. I know many of us in the West feel a little ambivalent about China's headlong march, but many also want to be part of it (not to miss the boat, so to speak). That is, I suppose, a reasonable justification for this special issue on Asia's urbanisation. Let me indulge myself to be a little didactic and offer this piece of advice: First, arm yourself with absolutely *NO* sense of cultural guilt. Have faith in what is commonly *good*.

Don't pretend that some instant 'cultural lessons' would afford you with a 'cultural sensibility' – though it is in my view a complex business of subtlety, but one that may take a lifetime to learn! I know this only too well as a 'migrant worker' living in Sydney. But what I can tell you is that the Chinese, perhaps subconsciously, have always used culture as some sort of camouflage to trap you into something that you do not necessarily believe. If you have something good to offer, take it to the Chinese and preach it with confidence.

Second: be hopeful that the currently frenzied China is ephemeral (if the Chinese do not ruin themselves as a civilization!). Let me share this Chinese philosophical riddle with you: there is a man who dislikes his own shadow; he tries to leave his shadow behind by running away from it. The faster he runs, the closer the shadow seems to chase him. Sage Zhuang Zi (about 300 to 200 BC) has this to say to the busy man: all he needs to do is to take a break under a big tree and his shadow will disappear! The Chinese, I am afraid, are chasing their shadow at the moment. But let us hope, beneath the glittering metallic sheen of their new buildings and cities, that China is still handmade.

#### Acknowledgements

This essay is a modified version of a keynote address, with the same title 'Ephemeral China/Handmade China', delivered by the author at the 'Smart Works: design and the handmade international symposium', Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, 30 March 2007.

#### Notes

1. Xing Ruan, *New China Architecture* (Singapore: Periplus, 2006).
2. This is based on the author's recollection of the Koolhaas lecture that preceded the round-table discussion, at which the author was one of the invited discussants - the 10th IIAS Annual Lecture by Rem Koolhaas, Leiden University, Amsterdam, 17 November 2005.
3. Here I refer to Yi-Fu Tuan's observations on new

city centres in China. See Yi-Fu Tuan, 'Time, Space, and Architecture: Some Philosophical Musings', in *Topophilia and Topophobia: Reflections on Twentieth-century Human Habitat*, ed. by Xing Ruan and Paul Hogben (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 22-30.

4. These statistics were provided by the *China Architecture and Building Press* in 2005.
5. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London and New York: Routledge, 1970).
6. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Morality and Imagination* (Madison and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 97.
7. Yi-Fu Tuan, 'Time, Space, and Architecture'
8. Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record and The Mirror of the Sea*, first published in 1912 and 1916, (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p.155.
9. Lin Yutang, *The Importance of Living*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, first Australian edition, 1946).
10. Ibid. p. 175.
11. Ibid. p. 145.
12. Ibid. pp. 141-48.
13. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 6-7.
14. Lin Yutang, *The Importance of Living*, pp. 3-4.
15. Ibid. p.1.

### Biography

Xing Ruan is Professor of Architecture, and Chair of the Architecture Discipline Group at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. His recent books include *Allegorical Architecture* (2007), *New China Architecture* (2006), and *Topophilia and Topophobia: Reflections on Twentieth-century Human Habitat* (2007, co-edited with Paul Hogben). Xing Ruan has written on a wide range of topics concerning legible relations between humans and the built world; he has also published in some of the world's leading scholarly journals, as well as professional magazines. He is co-editor, with Ronald Knapp, of the book series *Spatial Habitus: Making and Meaning in Asia's Architecture*. Born in China, he received his architectural education from the Southeast University in Nanjing.