In defense of the wrongly convicted—Ernst Börschmann’s *Chinesische Architektur* and the controversial synchrony of the Chinese architecture survey

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**ABSTRACT**

Writing the architecture survey remains one of the biggest challenges in the field. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western scholars usually followed a synchronic approach (literally “with-time”) and described Chinese architecture without reference to its development and evolution over time. Although synchrony (attention to a particular moment in time) is not incorrect in principle, it is all too often attached with a negative connotation. A possible reason is that Liang Sicheng, and the generations after him, have understood all facets of synchrony as expression of the old dichotomic worldview that once glorified Europe and deprived Asia of its history (non-historical timelessness) as formulated by the German philosophers Hegel and Herder and codified in Fletcher’s and Fergusson’s authoritative textbooks. Challenging the previous misconception of the generalization of synchronic textbooks, the paper attempts to examine the multiple facets of synchrony and identify the writing style of Börschmann’s *Chinesische Architektur*, the prime example of the German-language survey on Chinese Architecture. In doing so, the paper hopefully can provide basis and arguments in defense of the work, presenting a reconciliation to the biased, subjective presentation of Chinese architecture once afflicted with prejudices and misappréhensions. The paper values Börschmann’s *Chinesische Architektur* as a distinguished work different from other synchronic writings through its pioneering, value-neutral and formal approach.

1. **Introduction: something went wrong**

Ernst Börschmann (1873–1949), the first professor of Ostasiatische Baukunst (East Asian architectural art) appointed at the Technische Hochschule Berlin-Charlottenburg in 1925, is probably best known for his beautifully illustrated books (Börschmann 1911, 1914, 1923), that capture buildings in the context of daily life in China during the late-Qing dynasty (1644–1912). The books are pleasing and immediately comprehensible to any novice reader with the help from their captivating graphic materials. Motivated by positive reader reception and encouraged by Ernst Wasmuth Publishers, Börschmann began to develop new parameters of formal discussion that could explain the basic elements constituting the Chinese architectural system in written form (which he had already expressed graphically) on a broader, more abstract level and in a more systematic way. The result of his ambitious endeavor was a textbook titled *Chinesische Architektur* (1925) with one hundred and sixty-two pages of text and three hundred and forty plates (whole page illustrations), organized into two volumes (Harrer 2019) (Figure 1). The main body of text was loosely arranged into twenty chapters similar to a catalogue of design elements, framed by introductory and concluding remarks and supplemented by lengthy explanations for the plates attached at the end of each volume. The explanations for the plates were separated from the images they described, but this was in fact not so uncommon at that time due to printing limitations (Ecke 1937). The formal and sober chapter arrangement made it challenging for the readers to grasp the thread joining the individual parts, which was probably the reason why Börschmann added a concluding chapter titled Wesen (“essence” or ultimate nature of Chinese architecture) in the second volume to further explain his ideology.

Börschmann’s survey is one of the only two Chinese architecture surveys ever published in the German language (not considering translations of English-language research). It is a standard-setting text in the field but since its publication in 1925, it has stirred many diverse emotions, ranging from unanimous praises by the broader public to criticisms, confusions, and disenchantments by expert readers. Eminent scholars like Alfred Salmony (1890–1958), a German-born art historian and an authority on Chinese jade, refused to recognize Börschmann’s effort in laying the groundwork for theoretical knowledge acquisition of Chinese architecture beyond the visuals (Salmony 1928–1929, 178–179). Most recently, Eduard Kögel, author of the most comprehensive and up-to-date biographic study of Börschmann’s life work (*The Grand Documentation*;
In this paper I will argue otherwise. I will evaluate the character of Börschmann’s synchrony against the criteria for writing about Chinese history, arts and culture established in European academic circles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In order to interpret the author’s intentions and content structure from a fresh angle, I will contextualize the book historically, evaluating its strengths and weaknesses in the context of German-language art and architecture surveys and contemporary criticism. This will lead to a surprising conclusion that can serve to restore the author’s reputation as an architectural thinker (not just a talented photographer). The evaluation will also demonstrate the value of German-language contributions to the status quo of Chinese architecture studies outside of China, especially with regard to the extent to which academic performance is enhanced by synchrony.

2. Through the lens of Western linguistics

In my arguments, I borrow terminologies and methodologies from philosophies of history, mind, and language, using the two very broad categories of diachronic and synchronic (approaches), applied by the Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and posthumously published in his Cours de linguistique générale (1916) (Figure 2). Diachrony here refers to the focus on chronological development over time, whereas synchrony describes the attention to a particular moment concentrating on the formal operation of a system.

Architecture-language swapping is not new. Architecture has always lent itself well to the likening to language and has done so in multiple ways that differ in matters of attitude, emphasis, and purpose. It was a driving force behind the formulation of Western architectural theory especially in the Renaissance, when the orders of classical antiquity were perceived as syntactic rules governing the combination of individual elements into a coherent whole (Clarke and Crossley 2000, 5). The very same metaphor gained momentum in the Chinese context during the 1930s, when Liang, inspired by his Beaux-Arts training at the University of Pennsylvania, presented the two extant monographs compiled under imperial court patronage prior to the twentieth century (Yingzao fashi [Building standards], 营造法式; Kaifeng 1103, rpt. Hangzhou 1145; and Gongcheng zuofa [Engineering manual], 工程做法; Beijing 1734) as the “grammar books” of

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3At the end of volume one of Chinesische Architektur, Börschmann explains that all the drawings were prepared and reworked under his guidance from 1910 to 1912 based on his on-site sketches and measurements, probably by the young draftsman Karl Kraatz who had worked with him for the 1912 exhibition. (Börschmann 1925, 1: 86; Kögel 2015, 341 and 375).

James Ferguson (1808–1886), author of the first truly authoritative textbook on Chinese architecture, noticed the two opposing paths more than fifty years before the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure eventually formulated those two very broad categories.

His comment reads:

Like every other object of human inquiry, architecture may be studied from two distinct points of view. Either it may be described scientifically as a thing existing, without any reference to the manner in which it was invented; or it may be treated historically, tracing every form from its origin, and noting the influence one style has had upon another in the progress of time. (Ferguson 1835) 1865, 3)
Chinese architecture (Liang [1946] 2001, 27; Fairbank 1984, 14; Lai 2014; Harrer 2019). These facts are well known and by now, repeated to the point of redundancy.

The most intriguing and fresh aspect of linguistic input to the discussion of Western textbooks on Chinese architecture comes from its close connection to European-based sinology (Chinakunde; the study of Chinese philosophy, arts, history, and culture through literature and language). Philology and linguistics, the most important academic subjects in nineteenth-century Europe, were a gateway to the understanding of non-European cultures and stimulated advancements in China-related studies since the seventeenth century. Since studies in Chinese architecture benefitted from the adoption and adaptation of linguistic patterns, similar to the other disparate fields of inquiry that grew out of sinology, it is helpful to contextualize architectural synchrony and diachrony within the framework of the five-stage development process of German sinology outlined by Hans-Wilm Schüette (2004, 259), paying extra attention to the second and third stages.

The second stage, starting from the early nineteenth century, was the beginning of historical-comparative linguistics. This was a new and revolutionary approach that combined the diachronic study of language change over time with the study of linguistic affinity through comparative classification of languages with the aim to identify genetic, typological, and areal relationships among the world’s languages. Franz Bopp (1791–1867), the first professor of Oriental literature and general philology at the University of Berlin appointed in 1821, came forward with a ground-breaking six-volume comparative study of Indo-European languages titled *Vergleichende Grammatik* (Comparative grammar;}

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*A prominent recent example of the likening to language was born out of the Saussurean tradition itself. Starting with the mid- to late-twentieth century, postmodern architects around the globe have turned to non-linguistic signs and sign-using behavior – the core of Saussure’s semiology (the study of signs) – to explain the process of meaning-making in architectural design (Jencks 2011).*
1833–1852). Historical-comparative linguistics significantly advanced in the 1870s when the *Junggrammatiker* (neogrammarians) at the University of Leipzig established empirically found refutable patterns of regular sound change (sound laws) in their attempt to reconstruct Proto-Indo-European. The feature-by-feature comparison between different systems of thoughts with common descent was soon adopted by other fields within sinology. Of this stage had a profound influence on contemporary writers of global art and architecture survey texts within and outside of Germany.

While the second stage marks the beginning of the synchronic method, the third stage was the beginning of the development of the synchronic method. A milestone in the advancement towards the third stage (of institutionalization and academization of German sinology) came again from the field of linguistics through a publication – *Chinesische Grammatik mit Ausschluß des niedereren Stils* (Chinese grammar excluding the low style; 1881). It is the first specialized resource written in German to understand classical Chinese texts authored by Georg von der Gabelentz (1840–1893). Gabelentz was a professor at the University of Leipzig since 1878 and a professor at the University of Berlin from 1890 until 1893. He was a leading figure for the rise of general linguistics in the Humboldtian tradition of language-mentality connections, which arose as a counter-trend to historical-comparative linguistics as propagated by the neogrammarians and developed into an orthodox practice in the twentieth century. On this fertile ground finally fell Börschmann’s architecture survey. An additional twist to the discussion of synchronic survey was that Gabelentz eventually anticipated some of Saussure’s ideas in his *Die Sprachwissenschaft* (Linguistics 1891) two decades before Saussure’s 1906 and 1911 Geneva talks regarding the basis of the *Cour* (Ellers 2012, 61–65). However, to what extent Saussure actively borrowed from Gabelentz and which were exactly the works that were familiar to him is still debatable. In any case, the similarities between their theoretical concepts are rather striking. Gabelentz first distinguished conceptually between an analytic (diachronic) system and a more pronounced synthetic (synchronic) system. He also made the distinction between *Einzelsprache, Rede, and Sprachvermögen*, corresponding to Saussure’s *linguistique synchronique* and *linguistique diachronique* and Saussure’s trilogy of *langue, parole, and langage* (Gimm 1997). Although, for the sake of completeness, Eberhard Zwirner (1899–1984) suggested that both linguists borrowed from the French philosopher of science Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who founded positivism and formulated the two modes of static and dynamic for sociology in the first half of the nineteenth century (*Cours de philosophie positive, 1830–1842*) (Zwirner 1971, 32–34).

3. Reasoning the negative connotations of synchrony

The second development stage of German sinology gave birth to the historical-comparative method that focused on diachrony. The third stage gave birth to synchronic-diachronic duality but with a new emphasis on synchrony. Both approaches were true products of their time and as such, had a neutral connotation at the time of their formulation. Then, why, and how did synchrony, not diachrony, take on a negative under- tone that ultimately influenced the critical perception of the readers of Börschmann’s *Chinesische Architektur?*

3.1. Synchrony/de-historicization: English-language archetypes

Two pioneering, ideologically-laden studies written in English have long set the standard as a must-read for every Western student of Chinese architectural history – James Ferguson (1808–1886) *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture*, published in 1855 with subsequent editions and *A History of Architecture* by the two Bannister Fletchers, father (1833–1899) and son (1866–1953), published in 1896 with subsequent editions (Rujivacharakul 2010). In the bibliography of *Chinesische Architektur*, Börschmann lists Ferguson’s *Illustrated Handbook’s* Asian chapters turned into a monograph titled *The History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (second edition from 1899) (Börschmann 1925, 2, 68).

Both textbooks grew out of the popular nineteenth-century practice of cultural comparison and referenced the growing sense of imperialistic superiority of the West that found expression in the glorification of European values and their indestructibility at the expense of the East (Merkel 1942, 47). This attitude of superiority was substantiated with and reinforced through German philosophy. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), who first outlined this idea in German, captured China in powerful, figurative language, describing it with the catchy phrase of an “embalmed mummy, painted with hieroglyphs and wrapped in silk” (*eine balsamierte Mumie, mit Hieroglyphen bemalt*) and the metaphor of “sleeping winter animals” (*schlafende Wintertiere*) (Herder [1787] 1967, 14, 13) *(Figure 3 (a)).* Herder denies any chance for progress despite – or perhaps because of – the endless cycle of rise and decline that makes it impossible to escape from

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1The comparative method fell on fertile soil in German sinology as most linguists of the time were self-educated generalists (“orientalists”) versed in at least one second Asian language especially Sanskrit.
the self-imposed constraints of ethical tradition (Merkel 1942, 8–12; Franz 1942, 47; Rose 1951; Shulin 1958; Goebel 1995). He classified China as the first stage of world history likened to the childhood (“an edifice of ... happy children and brethren” [ein Haus ... glücklicher Kinder und Brüder]) due to China’s isolated location at the eastern corner of the Eurasian landmass which is synonymous with the end of the world (geographical basis of world cultural history) and thus at a diametrically opposed position to Europe, the ultimate pinnacle (Herder [1787] 1967, 14, 6). Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), the first true German philosopher of universal history, brought Herder’s ideas into a systematic form anchored in his present-centered view and justified them logically with the aim of understanding the peculiarities of the Orient and its people (Shulin 1958, 125; Dale 2014) (Figure 3b).5 Believing that all reality is capable of being expressed in rational categories, Hegel defines history as the intelligible process that advances in successive stages from the subjective to the objective and to the absolute; historical progress is then defined as “the development of the spirit’s consciousness of its own freedom” (Hegel [1822–1831] 1975, 138). History will ultimately end with the spirit’s realization of this freedom, which is possible only in Western nation-states that embody reason. China, by Hegel’s definitions, becomes unhistorical (an unhistorical history) because it lacks individuality (individual consciousness of the spirit) and thus stays isolated and stationary at its original inferiority (Hegel [1822–1831] 1975, 199; Shulin 1958, 67).

Assuming that culture reflects upon itself through the objects and buildings it produces, this led to the classification of global art, architecture, and culture according to socio-geographical factors and to the eventual historicization (evolution to higher and more complex stages through continuous change) of European architecture and de-historicization (stagnation at a primitive stage despite continuous change) of Asian architecture.

As a direct consequence for writing methodology, with both English-language textbooks confirming this pan-European trend, historicization results in diachronic analysis and de-historicization in synchronic description as there is simply no history worth discussion. Synchrony becomes a placeholder for the commodity of timelessness of Asian cultures, rooted in a mid- and late-nineteenth-century dichotic worldview of the West and a totally other Orient.

Without diminishing the importance of philosophy, if we were to look for practical reasons, the small number of monuments dating from the first millennium (the oldest timber-framed hall dating only back to 782 [early Tang; main hall of Nanchan Monastery, 南禅寺]) probably added complexity to the synchrony issue. From today’s perspective, the most obvious reason of the scarcity is, of course, not that old buildings have never existed; rather it lies in the ephemeral nature of the main building material wood, which, exposed to natural elements and man-inflicted damages, requires constant repair and renewal (old buildings looking new). To complicate matters, archeology and dendrochronology (scientific testing to determine the absolute age of timber) were only in

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5 Herder was not only the forefather of Hegel’s timelessness of China but also of Hegel’s Völksgeist (the spirit of the folk), which Hegel termed Geist des Volkes. But one thing should be clear; unlike Hegel, Herder believed that this spirit led to particularity and not to universality. Herder rejected national boundaries in the writing of history because history to him, history was expressed in a people’s distinct language, religion, art and culture and defined by a racial-ethic understanding of group identity beyond political borders (pan-national). Therefore, Herder rejected the a-priori presentation of the history of mankind as a whole coherent unit and to a certain extent, acknowledged empirical evidence.
their infancy. Additionally, the traditional Western concept of ruins was almost absent in imperial Chinese culture, where the past was visualized in culture-specific ways incomprehensible for the Western mind used to seeing the fallen stones (physical traces of the passing of time) of ancient Greek and Roman temples (Wu 2012). Considering that the Chinese empire, which has more than 2000 years in history, was not directly supported with factual evidence (intact or ruined buildings), Western architectural historians might have been pushed more towards (de-)historical synchrony and less towards diachrony. After all, the abundance and accessibility of late-imperial structures invited the scholarly mind to pay attention to a period more recent in time (seventeenth to twentieth centuries).

3.2. Diachrony/re-historicization: Chinese-language canon of the four outstanding

The denial of history triggered a fierce but fairly delayed response among Chinese intellectuals in their search for a new national identity during the twentieth century, one that could retain the best from the past and carrying it into the future (Li Shiqiao 2002, 2003). A focal point of dispute was Fletcher’s Tree of Architecture ([1896] 1905), a relic of the nineteenth-century dichotic worldview of “the self” (historicity) and “the primitive other” (timelessness); the Tree divided global architecture into historical and non-historical styles, or as later termed by Fergusson, into “true” (original) and “copying” (revival) styles (Elwall 1991, 404; Steinhardt 2014, 57) (Figure 4(a)). Interestingly, the analogy to language studies appears once again. Tree thinking originated in evolutionary biology to explain the evolution of species, but the idea of the phylogenetic tree was applied and elaborated in comparative linguistics before it became part of architecture discourse. In 1853, the German linguist and Indo-European specialist, August Schleicher (1821–1868), popularized the Stammbaummodell (genealogical tree model), depicting genetically related languages emerging out of a trunk of common parent (proto-language) of that family in the Hegelian sense (Schleicher 1862; Taub 1993, 177–178) (Figure 4(b)). In Fletcher’s tree, China is paired with Japan as part of the global narrative but is poorly positioned at the lowest and outermost branch of the tree whose trunk represents Greece and Rome.

Generations of Chinese architectural historians were haunted by Fletcher’s iconic image of the tree model colored with prejudice and a mocking undertone, and were committed to elevating China’s status to the top of the tree similar to Europe (Wang 2011, 84). Ironically, when faced with the lack of a native historiographical tradition that deals with building practice and theory as it occurs or changes over centuries, Chinese architectural historians of the First Generation turned to models from abroad for guidance (Min-Ying Wang 2010; Li 2002, 2003). In doing so, Lai Delin (2014, vii–xxv) had demonstrated the reasons for Liang’s choice of Winckelmann’s cyclic scheme of rise, decline, and fall in his Zhongguo jianzhushi (A History of Chinese Architecture) and Tuxiang Zhongguo jianzhi (A pictorial history of Chinese architecture) (both written in the 1940s) (Liang [1946] 2001, [1944] 2001).7

Nancy S. Steinhardt has suggested what happened next. Over the course of a decade, the Four Outstanding – Liang, Yang Tingbao (杨廷宝; 1901–1982), Tong Jun (童俊; 1900–1983), and Liu Dunzhen (刘敦桢; 1907–1968) – defined a norm (the “Chinese canon”) for writing the history of Chinese architecture as a continuous narrative based on diachronic logic (Steinhardt 2014, 52). At this point, I will not elaborate on the different shades of diachronic narrative. Here, the term diachrony serves as a possible placeholder for evolutionary, linear, and cyclic theories in gross outline, as the diachronic mode of linguistic study, as analyzed by Saussure/Gabelentz, does not have the rigidity of the evolutionary history of art nor that of the biological Darwinian process of replication and selection. Including an authoritative list of historical buildings and pre-conceived criteria of judgment, the Chinese canon presented a dominant model that, once formulated and effective after 1950, has made it challenging for Western scholars to ignore it and even more so, to match or exceed it without losing momentum. In the Anglophone, Alexander C. Soper (1904–1993), Princeton-trained architect and editor of Artibus Asiae, together with the director of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City Laurence Sickman (1907–1988) pioneered the English-language discussion according to succeeding dynasties just a few years after Liang but in a similar manner (Sickman and Soper 1956) (Figure 5). Naturally, linearity is just one route of the historical narrative. Contemporary art historian Jonathan Hay recently outlined an alternative for a sister discipline of architecture. Hay’s short article published in 2001 engages in a deep reexamination of the narrative mode of Chinese art history and challenges the understanding of historical change in Chinese art periodization, yet avoids

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7Winckelmann also inspired the Finnish-born Swedish sinologist Osvald Sirén (1879–1966) for his four-volume A History of Early Chinese Art (1929–1930). Lai then concludes that this, however, then made it impossible for them to opt for Heinrich Wolfflin’s (1864–1945) formal theories (Lai 2014, xiii), which are explained later in the text. But it is worth noting that Liang’s comparative analysis of hall and pagoda forms of succeeding dynasties parallels with Wolfflin’s method of comparing styles to identify their characteristics. And Liang’s introduction to the Chinese structural system (iv) in his A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture by Liang Ssu-Ch’eng (Fairbank 1984) creates a frame of reference for the English reader not so far off from Wolfflin’s neo-Kantian understanding of architecture as an organic system analogously to the human body (in function and structure) that grows harmoniously from within while following its intended goal-state. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) has also defined a system as the unity of constituent parts that grows organically and harmoniously from within.
identifying with either the evolutionary (diachronic) or essentialist (synchronic) model. Instead, Hay points to a kaleidoscopic model of disjunctive diachronics that also assembles events into a series but not necessarily into a linear one (Hay 2001, 106).

From today’s point of view, I cannot help but wonder if the efforts and endeavors of the First Generation of Chinese architectural historians were really a step in the right direction. If viewed metaphysically, their historicizing studies only reinforced
rather than removing European pejorative thought, simply because they still worked within the European system and not outside of it. It is significant for understanding the Chinese architecture survey text in the global context that we look at these theories divested of any ideological overtone. Speaking philosophically, “historical” and “de-historical” are then two categories that are only seemingly contradictory and mutually exclusive. In fact, they are interdependent stages or expressions of the same historicizing notion and thus, two dimensions of the same reality. They both operate within the framework of an extended historicity even though they lie at the extreme opposite ends of the judgmental range, conveying the meaning of either superiority (historical) or inferiority (de-historical).

4. Contextualizing Chinesische Architektur within German-language survey studies

4.1. Development of the Chinese architecture survey text

Without going into the details of the developments of the genre, Western-language survey of Asian architecture is commonly understood as a category under European literature. I will begin with a general observation. German writings on Chinese architecture are divided into several broad surveys (universale Darstellung) and a multitude of specialized studies (Spezialuntersuchung) that had dramatically increased since the late nineteenth century. This was due to the close, and often more enthusiastic attention given by the practicing architects, engineers, as well as sinologists to the natural and built environment. The textbook under discussion in this article belongs to the first type of study (broad surveys). German-language survey studies from the mid-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century address Chinese architecture (or in the Western sense, the “traditional art of building” (Baukunst) in China) in four ways that represent a more or less chronological development of art historical methodology and the emancipation of architecture from the general discussion of Chinese arts:

Firstly, information about architecture was incorporated in the main text. Secondly, it was contained in its own chapter. Thirdly, in the case of a multi-volume series, it was comprised in its own volume. Finally, a whole book was devoted to it.

A possible reason for the close connection between disciplines in the beginning is that architecture in Western thought – including in Germany – has been included among the fine arts from the time when the French philosopher Charles Baudelaire (1713–1780) promoted taste as a decisive factor for

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8The list of German-language writing on Chinese architecture includes among others: first, German-born architects and engineers engaged in design and construction in China, such as Friedrich Mahlke (1871–1944) and Heinrich Schubart (1878–1955); second, (secret government) building officers of the German empire in China such as Ernst Börschmann and Heinrich Hildebrand (1855–1925); third, sinologists, born or employed in Germany, such as Jakob Maria de Groot; fourth, German-born anthropologists such as Berthold Laufer (1874–1934); and fifth, China-enthusiasts like the linguist and entrepreneur Oskar Münsterberg.

9In order to better support my claim I am sketching the development of the Chinese architecture survey in dependency of the global art history survey text that had emerged as a literary genre in mid-nineteenth-century Germany, without going into details of any other inspirational reference model of architectural didactics. See Mitchell Schwarzer, “Origins of the Art History Survey Text,” Art Journal 54, no. 3 (1995), 24–29. In this paper, I will not explore any possible impact from these very different literary traditions: first, the writing of global architecture survey books like those of Johann Berhard Fischer von Erlach (1656–1723), Entwurf einer Historischen Architectur (Vienna: 1721) and Auguste Choisy (1841–1909), Historie de l'architectur (Paris: 1899); second, architectural pattern books like those of William Chambers (1723–1796), Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils [...]; (London: 1757) and William Halfpenny (active ca.1723–1755), Rural Architecture in the Chinese Taste (London: 1750); and third, design manuals in the Beaux-Arts tradition see, for example, David van Zanten, “Just What Was Beaux-Arts Architectural Composition?” in Chinese Architecture and the Beaux-Arts, ed. Jeffrey W. Cody, Nancy S. Steinhardt, and Tony Atkin [Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011], 23–37. The separation of arts (academic discipline performed by artists) and crafts (applied technique carried out by artisans) has a cultural dimension specific to Europe. By comparison, it did not exist in China until the nineteenth century when the concept of architecture, termed jianzhu (建筑), was introduced from Meiji Japan. One possible reason was that Confucian metaphysical philosophy did not value material artifacts.
architecture instead of utility or craftsman knowledge despite any cross currents (Batteux 1746). 10

The problem of timelessness of Asian arts that had led to de-historicization was partly resolved at the turn of the twentieth century, when Chinese art – although not architecture – was discussed in a diachronic manner similar to European art. A good example (is the works featured in) Chinesische Kunstgeschichte (1910–1912) by Oskar Münsterberg (1865–1920), comprising of a chronologically organized first volume on art (Vorbuddhistische Zeit; Die hohe Kunst) and a second volume on architecture (Die Bauskunst; Das Kunstgewerbe) (Figure 6). The architecture volume is divided into three rationalized formal chapters: Einzelformen (individual forms), Kaiserpaläste und Klosteranlagen (palaces and temples and more broadly, architectural clusters), and with a focus on the afterlife, Grabmonumente (funerary monuments). The book was critically perceived but ground-breaking, as it was the first two-part study of its kind in the German language. It is noteworthy that Münsterberg’s architecture volume still operates within the synchronic, de-historicizing framework à la Fergusson and Fletcher, because he explicitly denies architecture the capability for change – arguing that a form, once shaped, was cultivated and continued through centuries as a rigid, sacred tradition (Münsterberg 1912, 3). 11 Börschmann lists Münsterberg in his bibliography (Börschmann 1925, 2, 68) but, in contrast, Börschmann has not taken a position on the timelessness issue as he was not thinking along the same dialectical (either diachronic or synchronic) lines (Kögel 2015, 72). Without bias, prejudice, or preference, he identified the past (“das Historische [the historical]”) as key to Chinese culture and regarded tradition as a means not only for manifesting but for continuing the past, which by doing so, remained alive (Börschmann 1925, 1, 2). 12

Figure 6. Oskar Münsterberg, Chinesische Kunstgeschichte, vol. 2, 1912 (Photo by author).

4.2. From Wölfflin’s formalism to German building survey documentation

If we forget the differences between the sister disciplines of art and architectural history for a moment and focus on the commonalities, we can discern an initial common trend towards systematic, factual description beyond the historical gaze (neither historicizing nor de-historicizing). This commonality in German-language surveys in the century’s first decades proved useful to establishing the character of Börschmann’s synchrony.

In 1913, the German art historian and collector Curt Glaser (1879–1943) published his positively reviewed book Die Kunst Ostasiens; Der Umkreis ihres Denkens und Gestaltens (1913; second ed. 1920; 222 pages of text, 24 plates), which approaches Chinese art in a completely new, subjective and more synthetic (a-historical) way (Figure 7). 13 Similar to Börschmann, Glaser was neither interested in writing a linear history nor in

10Kant in his Kritik der Urteilskraft (1790) and Hegel in his 1826 lecture notes both understand architecture as a category of art. Philosophies of art (Kunstwissenschaft) and aesthetics and methodologies for artistic and aesthetic judgment including scientific analysis developed distinctively side-by-side and separately in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Art historians and art critics in the nineteenth century stimulated both fields: Heinrich Wölfflin, for example, formulated not only a theory of artistic formalism and stylistic comparison but also an einfühlungs theory based on empathic relationship with architecture (Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur; Ph.D. dissertation, Universität München, 1886).
11The German text reads: Daher gehenden Baukunst, Maler und Bildhauerei in der frühen abendländischen Kunst zusammen … Anders im Osten! Dort fehlten die Rassenkämpfe, Religionskriege, Völkerwanderungen und Kulturberührungen … die Folge war, dass die einmal entstandene Form als heilige Tradition durch Jahrhunderte weitergepflegt und trotz unzähliger Variationen immer in demselben Grundstil wiederholt wurde. (Münsterberg 1912, 3)
12The German text reads: Wenn in irgend einem Lande die Historische eine wirklich große Bedeutung gehabt hat dann war es in China. Aber weil es sich dort vornehmlich als Tradition auswirkte, und somit dauernd im Gebrauch war, blieb es lebendig, und als einen lebendigen Organismus müssen wir China ansehen. Das gilt auch für seine Baukunst.” (Börschmann 1925, 1, 2)
13The German text reads: Der Autor tritt in etwas anderes Weise und sein Thema heran, als die meisten seiner Vorgänger. Er will nicht Geschichte bieten, es liegt ihm nichts daran, Namen zu nennen, auch nicht die der größten Meister, er will nicht einmal die Gesamtheit der Lösungen behandeln, die Ostasien fand, oder der Kunstgattungen, in denen es sich versuchte … Er will vielmehr nur gewisse, frei gewahrte Hauptprobleme untersuchen.Glaser selbst legt, wie schon betont, auf Vollständigkeit nach keiner Richtung hin Wert … In den meisten Fällen geht er nach kurzem Zaudern zur selbständigen Analyse der Kunst und der geistigen Atmosphäre über, bewaffnet mit dem Rüstzeug des modernen Kunstforschers. Und hier sind die hervorragenden Qualitäten des Buches zu suchen. (Cohn 1914, 30)
offering a wholesome solution for East Asian art with all its genres (Cohn 1914, 28–30). Rather, he dealt with certain, freely chosen problems and analysed works of art beyond, not within, their socio-historical context in the manner similar to that of Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945), supervisor of Glaser’s 1907 doctoral thesis. The Swiss art historian Wölfflin was a former student of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) in Berlin where he was appointed professor in 1901 (Figure 9(a)). Wölfflin promoted observation and the analysis of the visual aspects of external form (and thus style) contained within the artefact at the time of viewing; his concept was later radicalized and reduced to “art for art’s sake” (Principles of Art History, 1915) (Figure 8). Although Wölfflin borrowed old methodology from the field of nineteenth-century philology (the comparative method to determine characteristics of style) similar to Fletcher and Fergusson, he arrived at a different conclusion – replacing archaeological recovery (explaining the literal/historical relevance of the monument) with the then popular neo-Kantian (anti-Hegelian) empirical use of perceptual psychology à la Dilthey (shifting focus on the modern viewer’s understanding) (Hart 1982, 295). The German philosopher, sociologist, and psychologist Dilthey had formulated a new conception of the historical nature of consciousness through psychology and epistemological hermeneutics (Makkreel 1993; Koslowski 2006). Dilthey argued that there is no non-positional consciousness, as we can only comprehend with reference to our experiences. Dilthey’s theory of understanding (Verstehen) gave the humanities a specific basis, distinguishing itself from the natural sciences’ theory of explanation (Erklären), which went hand in hand with an increased appreciation of all expressions of life including written, painted, or constructed evidence. Dilthey’s works emerged in response to the ideas of the four-decade older Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) and founder of the modern source-based historical narrative and adherent of the new school of contemporary history (Figure 9(b)). Ranke’s goal had been to integrate the Orient and its people into world history through empirical, objective study instead of through personal judgment as Hegel had done (Shulin 158, 295).

\[\text{Figure 7. Curt Glaser, Die Kunst Ostasiens, (1913) 1920 (Photo by author).}\]

\[\text{Figure 8. Heinrich Wölfflin, Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe, 1915 (heiOPENsearch, Heidelberg historic literature digitized, https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/woelfflin1915/0007).}\]
For the study of global art, Ranke had suggested looking at specific art objects rather than searching for a single defining principle. Ranke and Dilthey stimulated a radical change in the formerly widespread cultural skepticism and disdain against China in the German empire in the advent of the First World War. Börschmann was well aware of this phenomenon and the resultant altered receptiveness of author and readers. In the concluding chapter of *Chinesische Architektur*, similar to Glaser (1913, vii), he elaborated on the subjective experience of knowledge acquisition and the necessity to revise the old Eurocentric evaluation criteria (Börschmann 1925, 2, 48).

Wölfflin’s new formalism gains additional momentum when applied to architecture, especially if viewed against the background of German pragmatism that constitutes a further potential cause for the new emphasis on synchrony (attention to a particular moment). Sinologist Wolfgang Franke (1912–2007) once sarcastically concluded that the pragmatic German understanding of all Chinese issues had originated in the practical needs of colonial expansion. The resulting focus on the present, despite the short lived German colonialism in China, had developed into one of the four major trends in Asian studies dominating the German-based field to the present day ([1959] 1960). At the turn of the twentieth century, this pragmatism had given birth to a new fascination with the emphasis on surveying and mapping of historical buildings that can be seen as the implementation of the first step of Wölfflin’s methodology, specifically the factual description of empiric evidence in the form of meticulous building survey documentation. Börschmann, whose works helped to start this new practice, had an architecture related job in the German military stationed in China that allowed him to combine personal interest with the practical needs of the empire’s imposition of power over China. After his architectural training in the late-nineteenth century Berlin, Börschmann served as a building inspector of the German Imperial Colonial Office from 1902 to 1904. Following which he led a three-year survey expedition of Chinese architecture starting in 1906 that was financially supported by the German Reichstag (war ministry). In 1912, he finished his six years of service for the ministry of war and was appointed as a government building officer (Baurat) with the personal rank of councilor of the fourth class (Kögell 215, 380). While working as a military architect, he documented the factual particulars of the Azure Clouds Temple (Biyunsi 碧云寺) in Beijing through detailed photographs and accurate drawings and measurements he

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17There were also good practical reasons for the new way of thinking. The four German Turfan expeditions (1902–1914) to Xinjiang, organized by the Indologist and Tibetologist Albert Grünwedel (1856–1935) and archaeologist Albert Le Coq (1860–1930), had brought about real and radical changes in the formerly widespread cultural skepticism and disdain against China in the German empire. Note that the twentieth-century German explorers of Central Asia saw historical buildings or their remains, but they did not really write about architecture. Their expeditions stimulated a fascination with Chinese religion especially Buddhism; the German physician and sinophile Paul Dahlke (1865–1928) published his *Aufsätze zum Verständnis des Buddhismus* (1903) and *Buddhismus als Weltanschauung* (1912), and the Dutch professor Jan van der Voo (1854–1923) wrote a specialized study titled *Der Thupa, das Heiligste Heiligtum des Buddhismus in China* (1919) that focused on the Buddhist stupa.

18The ninety-nine-year Klautschou Bay concession, granted by the Qing government in 1898, was canceled in 1914. The former German colony of Tsingtau (qingdao 青岛) defended by German forces and Austro-Hungarian allies was also seized after a two-months siege by British and Japanese troops, following Japan’s declaration of war against the German empire. The territory eventually returned to China in 1922, after the confiscated German colonies in the Far East (Pacific territories north of the equator including China) had been ceded to Japan in the Treaty of Versailles (proving public protest, the May Fourth Movement).
made on site. He probably had learnt this practice from Heinrich Hildebrand (1855–1925), another (secret) government building officer of the German empire in China and author of an illustrative monograph on another Beijing temple (Dajuesi 大觉寺; 1897) (Kögel 2015, 42).

5. Through the eyes of his contemporaries

Although Hildebrand excelled at the highest level in documenting that one temple, he shied away from the task of writing a broader survey. In the concluding remarks of his book, he explained the reasons: drawing meaningful conclusions about the (organic) system of Chinese architecture would require further building survey documentation according to highest (aka German) standards (Hildebrand 1897, 35). The insufficient and inadequate data available continued to constitute grounds for complaint in German academic circles over the next three decades. Börschmann also mentioned this on several separate occasions (Börschmann 1914, vii; and in a letter to his younger colleague, art historian Gustav Ecke [1896–1971], written on 23 June 1926, just a few months after the publication of Chinesische Architektur [Walravens 2010, 105]). Knowledge about traditional Chinese architecture within and outside China increased drastically only with the establishment of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture (Zhongguo Yingzao Xueshe; 中国营造学社) in Beijing in 1930 – which was two years after the main protagonist in the Society’s systematic fieldwork, Liang Sicheng, had graduated from the University of Pennsylvania (1928) and six years after Börschmann’s book had been published (1925). Several authors have insightfully discussed the importance of the Society and the roles of Liang and Börschmann in it (Cui 2004; Zhao [1998] 2006; Zhao 2017; Lu and Zhao 2019), leading to the belated acknowledgement of Börschmann’s contributions to the field in China (Shen 2005; Wang 2011). Liang joined the Society in 1931, the same year as the founder of the Society, Zhu Qiqian (朱启钤; 1872–1964) made Börschmann, at his own request, a corresponding member (Walravens 2010, 128). In 1934, almost a decade after the publication of Chinesische Architektur, Börschmann finally met Liang in Beijing; and on Börschmann’s recommendation Liang was then asked to join the Berlin-based Society of Research in East Asian Art (Gesellschaft für Ostasiatische Kunst) in April 1938 as a corresponding member (Lin 1995, 25–27; Kögel 2015, 558). The relationship of the two pioneers of Chinese architecture studies was built on mutual respect but was somewhat uneven: Börschmann was full of praise to Liang, while Liang was reserved, or at best, torn between compliment and criticism towards Börschmann (Liang [1934] 2001, 296; Börschmann 1937, 128; Wang 2011, 82 and 85).

5.1. Criticised for content scope …

Given the time-related challenges in managing the scope of content in writing the Chinese architecture survey before the year 1930, it is surprising to find that to be the main point of criticism. None of Börschmann’s contemporaries ever questioned Börschmann’s training and expertise, nor his empathic understanding of Chinese architecture. Instead, Walter P. Yelts (1878–1957), one of the few Western sinologists versed in Chinese architecture, and many other scholars disagreed Chinesische Architektur for its lack of comprehensiveness (Franke 1926; Kümmel 1927; Yelts 1927, 124). On closer examination, the rationale behind such criticism appears rather strange, precisely because Börschmann has already declared himself aware of this “weakness” in the introduction (Börschmann 1925, 1, 1). He stated that the discussion would be based on the limited few sites he had visited in the first decade of the twentieth century when travelling across fourteen out of the eighteen cultural

19The original German text reads:

Erst wenn ein größere Anzahl solcher Untersuchung vorliegt, wir es gelingen, durch vergleich derselben allmählich das Dunkel zu lichten, das vorläufig noch über die Entwicklung der Baukunst in dem ostasiatischen Riesenreich gebreitet ist, und zu einem Gesamtbild derselben zu erlangen. (Hildebrand 1897, 35)

Although his methodology was conceptually advanced, Hildebrand still ignored and denied change, arguing that Chinese architectural technology had stagnated for centuries:

Die einzige Antwort auf diese Fragen kann nur dahin lauten, dass in China, wie auf allen anderen Gebieten, so auch in der Entwicklung der Baukunst, seit Jahrhunderten ein gewisser Stillstand eingetreten ist. In the wilden Volks-Stämme, welche von Norden her zeitweise als Eroberer in das Land eingeführt, standen auf der niedrigsten Kulturstufe und konnten auf das große Chinesische Reich von nur untergeordnetem guten, vielleicht in der Regel nur von Kultur-störendem Einfluss seien. In einen ermesslichen Konflikt mit einem Kulturvolk ist China nie geraten; kein großer Krieg mit einem solchen hat ihm Anregung zu Fortschritten gegeben. (Hildebrand 1897, 24)

20Yelt’s much quoted saying runs: The title Chinesische Architektur, given to the large book under review, is at first somewhat misleading, since it suggests a comprehensiveness which is lacking. (Yelts 1927, 124)

21The original German text reads:

Die Begrenzung ist in erster Linie geographisch. Bei aller Einheitlichkeit der chinesischen Kultur, die mit Recht immer als einer ihrer vornehmsten Merkmale bezeichnet wurde, sind die Einflüsse, die sich aus anderen Ländern empfingen, ausserordentlich stark gewesen. Stets aber, und heute mehr als je, seit der Schwerpunkt im alten Kulturgebiet der achtzehn Provinzen. Auf diese Gebiet bleibt die Darstellung beschränkt, insbesondere noch auf den Reichsweg des Verfassers, der durchweg nur alten, vielbegangenen Strassen folgte, … (Börschmann 1925, 1, 1)

He visited fourteen Kulturprovinzen, namely Xing (直隶), Henan (河南), Shanxi (山西), Shandong (山东), Shaanxi (陕西), Sichuan (四川), Hubei (湖北), Hunan (湖南), Jiangxi (江西), Guangxi (广西), Guangdong (广东), Fujian (福建), Zhejiang (浙江), and Jiangsu (江苏). He did not come through Gansu (甘肃), Guizhou (贵州), Yunnan (云南), and Anhui (安徽). (Börschmann 1910, 390–426.)
provinces (Kulturprovinzen) of late-Qing China. As a side remark, given the limited time available and under the then prevailing local conditions, he had in fact seen an impressive number of buildings; he had not visited the earliest surviving wooden buildings still bearing witness to centuries-old traditions dating prior to the Yuan dynasty (1267–1368) as they had not yet been discovered and were thus unknown to Börschmann and his critics when the book was published. At the same token, the noted German sinologist and manchurologist Erich Hauer (1878–1936) criticized Börschmann for lacking convincing historical evidence in his discussion that, according to his colleague Alfred Salmond, should start with (funerary) artifacts from the Han dynasty (202 BCE–CE 220) (Hauer 1926, 607–612; Salmond 1928–1929, 178–179). And yet, on the second page of text, Börschmann had also made clear his intention to only pay attention to a particular moment in time, restricting the period under investigation to the “present” (lebendige Gegenwart) (Börschmann 1925, 1, 2). Oddly enough, this “present” was frozen in time and did not correlate with the time of publication of Chinesische Architektur in the mid-1920s: Börschmann sorted and processed the materials that he collected during his first two stays in China, which he had shown to the public in an exhibition consisting of 400 drawings and photos held at the Royal Museum of Decorative Arts in Berlin, Germany, from June 4 to 20 July 1912 (Jäger 1945–1950; Kögel 2015, 74–333; Walravens 2010, 99–101).

5.2. But not for content structure

To paint the whole picture, Konrad Nonn (1877–1945), a leading figure in the architectural scene in pre-WWII Germany and editor of the influential Zentralblatt der Bauverwaltung, commended Chinesische Architektur in a positive light (Nonn 1926, 352–353). He stated that not only had his expectations in no way been disappointed; Börschmann’s choice of methodology (his eclectic glimpse of seemingly unconnected elements) catered to the needs of the mind of the modern architect not familiar with Chinese history and culture. The opposing comments can be partially explained by the interdisciplinary nature of the Chinese architecture survey, operating at the interface between arts (art of building), humanities (Chinese area studies), and science (construction engineering) as well as between theory (researchers) and practice (designers). John A. Pope (1906–1982), former director of the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, once sarcastically remarked that the distinguished tradition of art history was well equipped with European views and methodologies but not with the necessary knowledge of Chinese language, culture, and socio-geopolitical history (Pope 1947, 388). Neither the sole linguistic competence of the sinologist (ability “to use Chinese source materials”) nor the art or architectural trained eye (“the ability to see”) through years-long first-hand study and formal analysis of artifacts can resolve the problem – it is only possible with the combination of both (“twofold training”) (Pope 1947, 416). Taking a critical look at himself (in a letter from 23 June 1926), Börschmann is well aware of the limitations he faced in knowledge acquisition and that the current discussion in Chinesische Architektur is insufficient in satisfying the curiosity of art historians and sinologists (Walravens 2010, 105).

Although this is a purely hypothetical scenario, we may still ask if more robust data and in-depth knowledge would have prompted Börschmann’s decision to write a historical narrative with chronological organization. I am inclined not to believe this for three reasons. Firstly, faced with nearly insurmountable problems, Börschmann did not feel discouraged, nor was he willing to curtail content structure and organization to the limitations imposed by his factual knowledge. And why should he? Lesser known but not less importantly, the following lines of Yetts’ most often quoted critique expressed in fact a favorable opinion: he approved Börschmann’s choice for methodology, praising him for his endeavour to create a much needed (although not yet perfect) repertoire of architectural elements (Yetts 1927, 124). Secondly, Börschmann was highly skeptical of historical sources, believing that architecture must be perceived through the senses instead of learned from books (Harrer 2019, 303). He might not have benefitted from the first Western-language article on the long-lost Yingzao fashi written by the Swiss-born sinologist and co-editor of the influential Dutch journal Young Pao, Paul Demiéville (1894–1979) that was published a few months after Chinesische Architektur (Harrer 2019, 285–287). And finally, jumping ahead in time,

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22The original German text reads:

Ist unser Gebiet räumlich auf das alte China und zeitlich auf die Gegenwart beschränkt, so ist es klar, dass rein kunstgeschichtliche oder gar allgemein geschichtliche Gesichtspunkte stark zurücktreten müssen. In unserem historisierenden Zeitalter, in dem erst neuere die pragmatische und vitale Auffassung der Dinge wieder zu ihrem Rechte kommt, unterschätzte man bei wissenschaftlichen Forschungen, die sich auch mit der Vergangenheit beschäftigen müssen, die lebendige Gegenwart und glaubt zum Teil noch heute, die Ratsel eines Volkes aus der Kenntnis seiner Geschichte oder gar seiner Vorgeschichte heraus lösen zu können. (Börschmann, Chinesische Architektur 1: 2)

23As a side remark, the problematic disposition has not been resolved today. Chinese architecture studies are still treated as a stepchild of different disciplines in European and American academia, causing readers with different academic backgrounds to interpret and value the same text differently.

24The English text reads:

The first attempt to deal with the subject [Chinese architecture] as a whole . . . He has achieved his aim admirably . . . Nevertheless, students cannot but regret that Dr. Boerschmann did not plan his book on more ambitious and comprehensive lines, and utilize his extensive knowledge and abundant material to give within the covers of one work a digest of all he had to say on the subject. This would have provided a much needed repertory of Chinese architecture . . . (Yetts 1927, 124)
6. Re-framing German synchrony outside the causality pattern box

6.1. Transgressing the borders of categories

Why then must diachrony and synchrony be put in juxtaposition to each other if they are inherently interdependent. Perhaps, the question is not about choosing one mode over the other, as both language and architecture have developed over time (diachronic phenomenon) and existed at any given point in time (synchronic phenomenon), but about finding a way to co-exist and organize this co-existence. In his critical discussion of Saussure and his interpreters, Joshua Katz (2015) pointed to the equal importance of the diachronic and synchronic modes, warning about the negative consequences of misinterpreting Saussure’s Cours. Although never intended by Saussure, his emphasis on synchrony has led his followers to refuse the diachronic mode, denying “what had been the core of linguistics (diachronic, language history) in favor of the new synchronic science” (Katz 2015, 121–124; Harris 2001). Katz explains in a very descriptive way the striking development from a balanced pair in the nineteenth century (including the “fundamentally diachronic” pre-Cours approach; the “also synchronic” approach of the Cours; the Saussurean linguistics’ “synchronic-and-diachronic” approach) to a troubled pair in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (including the post-Saussurean linguistics’ “synchronic-versus-diachronic” approach and “fundamentally synchronic” approach).

Applying this line of thought to the architecture survey, there are at least four classifications of content structure with further branching potential if synchronic and diachronic are viewed as temporal qualities associated with movements along the horizontal or vertical axis (Figure 10). This then results in the following schemata – first, purely synchronic; second, purely diachronic; third, first synchronic then diachronic; and fourth, first diachronic then synchronic. While the first and second scenarios are mutually exclusive, rarely appearing conceptual entities in their purest form, the third and fourth ones are constituted by both modes – synchronic and diachronic – through a bottom-up or top-down relationship that denotes structured specification within a category in the respective directions.

The combined approach strikes a balance between diachronic and synchronic, and most authors

![Figure 10. Synchrony and diachrony, schematic drawing mapping out content specification and chronological development as movements along the vertical and horizontal axes (Drawing by author).](image-url)
eventually do so at some point in their writing. A prerequisite is the willingness to avoid de-historicization and to acknowledge the need to consider historical change, which is something Börschmann was disposed to doing (Börschmann 1925, 1, 2) as noted in Nonn (1926, 352–353). Börschmann discussed each of his carefully chosen elements separately within the relevant chapters (a-historical, synchronic description), but throughout the text he repeatedly makes general, often spurious statements about the historical genesis and evolution of Chinese architecture (diachronic narrative). For example, chapter eight on beam frameworks and columns (Gebälk, Säulen) posits that the exposed ceilings of buildings he surveyed are the most common and most genuine Chinese forms of construction.25 To support his theory, Börschmann traces the chronological development of this motif, while pointing to coffered ceilings of foreign, Greek, origin (flat and domed) where the members of the roof frame are hidden from the viewer. Unfamiliar with imperial building codes linking the social status of the owner to either of the two ceiling types, he erroneously concludes that suspended interior ceilings never played a crucial role in Chinese building practice and theory. This certainly cannot withstand critical examination according to current body of knowledge.-

More importantly, not even Börschmann, whose survey is considered a prime example of a-historical reasoning, is convinced that architectural form and language can be decoded by focusing exclusively on the present without considering the rich architectural past (which in this case, includes a more or less successful attempt to describe the Sino-Western cultural dialogue that took place in the past).

There is only one other Chinese architecture survey book written in German that represents the finest of its kind – Thomas Thilo’s underrated Klassische chinesische Baukunst, Strukturprinzipien und soziale Funktion (252 pages of text, 69 plates; 1977) (Figure 11). Illustrations in Thilo’s book are interwoven with the text as a result of advanced printing techniques. Thilo, internationally known for his discussion of Sui-Tang Chang’an and his philological studies of text fragments from Turfan, relied heavily on Chinese material published by Liang and his colleagues from the Society. Framed by an introduction and a conclusion with appendices, the book has eight chapters with titles that follow the way designers and planners think about the built environment. Two full chapters are organized chronologically as they discuss the genesis and transformation of structure and form (Werden von Struktur und Form; Wandlung von Struktur und Form). In the introduction, Thilo explains his intention to outline the basic principles of architecture without linking them into a linear narrative structure (Thilo 1977, 7). In the bibliography, Börschmann is listed as a major Western resource and Liang as a Chinese resource (Thilo 1977, 243 and 245–246). That is to say, although a certain influence from the diachronics of the Chinese canon on the content cannot be denied, as a whole, Thilo’s book diverges from the Chinese standard and instead, continues the German format outlined by Börschmann through a first-synchronous-then-diachronic mode.

6.2. Anticipating Liang?

Considering that the iconic figure of German-language Chinese architecture studies – Ernst Börschmann – fell short in the eyes of Liang and his Chinese colleagues (Fairbank 2008, 29), it might be helpful to ask if his critics were open to conceptualizing the two very different facets of synchronic (caught up in matters of content scope?), and if they were eventually in a position to sensitize the possibilities hidden in the formal German writing style. To answer this question, it is
useful to re-write the Chinese canon and Liang’s scholarship on a smaller canvas with a finer brush, using the branching schema of linguistic parameters as outlined above. Perhaps Liang’s diachronics were less restrictive and rigid than originally assumed.

Steinhardt (2014) has identified three levels of modality under which the canon is put into effect: first, a chronological, linear narrative, then, within a period, formal analysis for each building task or type, starting from large scale (city) through medium scale (palaces, temples, houses) up to small scale (art of architecture, decoration), and finally, content-wise specification within each section according to fixed categories that reflect traditional craftsman logic of classification into types of work. This is a classic example of the first-diachronic-then-synchronic approach that is enhanced through doubling of synchronic layers in the form of a two-step specialization (first-diachronic-then-synchronic). Diachrony is the starting point for discussion and in the previous section, I have outlined possible reasons why the First Generation of Chinese historians arrived at this decision. More significantly, synchrony has shed any ideological overtone of timelessness and serves as a value-neutral measure of descriptive documentation similar to what Börschmann had done on a much smaller and less detailed scale. Seen from this new viewpoint, the main difference is just the sequence of logical arrangement of parameters (first diachronic versus first synchronic). Assuming that this is a merely formal matter, I am tempted to ask if Börschmann’s biggest mistake simply was that he choose synchrony over diachrony as a starting point.

In 1935, a decade after the publication of Chinesische Architektur, Liang published a set of catalogues titled Jianzhu sheji cankao tuji (Collected reference drawings of architectural design, 建筑设计参考图集) that came even closer to Börschmann’s synchronic formalism (Liang and Liu [1935] 2001) (Figure 12). Each catalogue discussed a category of elements (yuhui, 语汇 or building parts, features, and motifs) ranging from columns, beams, and block-bracket clusters (dou-gong, 斗拱) to doors and roof ornaments. The catalogues were part of his two-fold concept of grammar (wenfa, 文法; aka the two government manuals) and vocabulary (as newly defined by him) inspired by Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand’s (1760–1834) composition and elements theory; this was later on elaborated by Julien Guadet (1834–1908) and was taught at the University of Pennsylvania (Lai 2009, 60) (Lai 2014). Penn-trained Liang elaborated the origin and development of each element separately within the relevant category, a classical first-synchronic-then-diachronic mode. For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that Chinese technical literature had prioritized synchronic description for centuries, although based on a different logic of content categorization. This becomes evident in the building-method chapters of the government manuals Yingzao fashi and Gongcheng zuo fa that divided labor and crafts into a handful of fixed types (e.g. wood carpentry; stone work; brick work).

That is to say, the synthetic content structure in chapter title and arrangement are the same in Liang’s and Börschmann’s surveys. The authors’ intention to reshuffle the building blocks of the Chinese architectural system is also similar, with the ultimate aim of facilitating knowledge comprehension and practical usage in modern design. This becomes significant if we look closer at the reasons for Liang’s critique. Wilma Fairbank (1909–2002) recalls Liang passing judgment on Börschmann because of his apprehension towards historical literature (Yingzao fashi) but not his methodical thinking (Fairbank 2008, 29). Ignoring for a moment the influence of Liang’s American Beaux-Arts training, we could, on a purely hypothetical basis, argue that Börschmann’s formal discussion not only foreshadowed Liang’s model for progressive design elaboration, but also inspired it. Börschmann’s survey showed a way to override the problematic division inspired by Hegel’s Eurocentric worldview once and for all: allowing buildings and building activities to be

Figure 12. Liang Sicheng, Jianzhu sheji cankao tuji, 1941, cover of part eight (Public domain image).
portrayed out of ideological order and beyond socio-cultural valuation in Dilthey’s sense – without any direct causality of a society and culture to its history and instead, within new cognitive, emotional, and imaginative parameters of perception.

7. Conclusions: a-historical not de-historical synchrony

Synchronic, literally “with-time”, describes a particular procedure of approaching things at a given, frozen moment in time, similar to a parallel movement along the axis of simultaneity. Synchrony is not wrong in principle, and the synchronic formalism of Börschmann’s *Chinesische Architektur* is not necessarily a step in the wrong direction. The proper meaning of the word is value-neutral until we add a cultural and emotional connotation to it. The prime example of the Chinese architecture survey text written in German – Börschmann’s *Chinesische Architektur* – has been an area of contention for almost a hundred years, because its readers have often attached false associations to the usage of the term “synchronic”, making it appear negative when it should not. In 2011, Wang Guixiang still explained Börschmann’s synchrony through the ignorance that has prevailed among Western scholars since the publication of Fletcher’s Tree of Architecture Fletcher ((1896) 1905).

Working with the above assumptions of the paper, I have made two claims to evaluate these assumptions: that Chinese architectural literature written by Western scholars before the establishment of the “Chinese canon” was mostly synchronic; and that all synchronic writing styles used in the nineteenth- and twentieth centuries were, and still are, lumped together in one category and positioned in contrast to the diachronic scheme defined by Liang Sicheng. In order to question that drastic generalization and to prove my claims, I have developed an argument, which concludes that there were two possible causes for the prominent synchrony in Chinese architectural literature, and that they stemmed from two very different approaches. Firstly, the de-historicization of Asian art and culture which in turn, built on the historicity of global history through comparative classification. Secondly, the preferable ideology-neutral attention to form anchored in the present moment of observation (the act of viewing) or description (the act of writing). These two facets of the synchronic are clearly distinguishable in their roots and academic objectives but are still inherently interdependent, with the second developed from the first. As both facets have thus a complementary historical undertone, they are understood here as time-specific contextualizations; and I have attempted to establish their distinct characteristics by viewing them through the lens of linguistic methods, global history theories, art survey methods, and literary criticism by contemporaries. Although both approaches are first and foremost synchronic and non-chronological in their intention, in practice, synchrony à la Börschmann was often just the starting point, as the discussion then expands and branches out over time, developing into a mixture of formats (first-synchronic-then-diachronic scheme).

Despite the dangers inherent in neologism, I have introduced additional jargon to help distinguish between the two mindsets expressed by two different writing styles. In an attempt to highlight the nuanced differences between the two facets of the synchronic (broadly non-historical), I have addressed them either as “de-historical” or “a-historical. The prefix “de” used to indicate negation and denial of Asian cultural history and the prefix “a” is used to indicate the absence of necessity to focus on history and historical development over time at all (as in a-temporal). Among these two facets of the synchronic, only one – the a-historical mindset of Börschmann’s *Chinesische Architektur* – remains modernist and valuable for today. There is a significant difference from Fergusson’s take on Asian history – in that he believed that it lacks architecture completely, while Börschmann believed that it was simply not meaningful for its time. This small difference is crucial in granting the achievements Börschmann made in the book as he puts these new ideas into writing practice. Despite making mistakes due to the issues of knowledge acquisition in his time, his bold and ground-breaking contributions still deserves recognition. This paper hopefully has contributed to the better understanding of the hitherto-neglected second facet of the synchronic and helped to free Börschmann’s survey text once and for all from a number of persistent misunderstandings concerning its academic value beyond the visuals.

As a final thought, Börschmann’s 1912 exhibition of Chinese architecture that was the basis of his 1925 book coincided with a drawing exhibition of Joseph Maria Olbrich (1867–1908), a famous architect in Darmstadt and Vienna and designer of the architectural manifesto of the Vienna Secession movement in 1897 (Kruft 1996, 318) (Figure 13). Advocating for a concept of contemporary artistic pluralism stripped of any historical chains (“Der Zeit ihre Kunst. Der Kunst ihre Freiheit.” [To every age its art. To every art its freedom.]), the Secession revolutionized long-established fine art traditions and institutions. Their liberal artistic program resolved the dependency of their contemporaries on historical knowledge as the decisive factor for good architectural design and writing, fitting perfectly with Börschmann’s portrayal of China within new
parameters of perception. The remarkable concurrence of the two events might have been a twist of fate, but one that is extraordinarily telling.

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