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Architectural diplomacy: a historical review of the Japan-China Society of Architecture and Building Technology

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ABSTRACT

By tracing the historical activities of the Japan-China Society of Architecture and Building Technology (JCSABT, 1973–2003), which was established in Japan in 1973, this study firstly provides an overview of the friendly exchange groups visiting China from Japan over a 30-year period. Drawing upon a systematic review of *Nichi-Chu Kenchiku* [Japan – China Architecture], the official journal of JCSABT, this study delineates the evolving professional concerns and focal themes of Japanese architects engaged in China. The focus gradually shifted from early concerns with the construction of socialist China to an interest in cultural heritage, particularly Chinese vernacular architecture, and later to friendly visits and international exchanges. These shifts reflect the dynamic interplay between political context, architectural evolution, and cultural exchange. The study concludes that beneath the surface of “friendly diplomacy,” China and Japan each pursued distinct agendas. China seeks to learn advanced techniques from Japan, while Japan, faced with pressing issues such as widening urban-rural disparities and environmental crises, endeavours to learn from China’s urban and rural development models. Above all, “architectural diplomacy” played a crucial role in fostering Sino – Japanese friendship. The interplay among state power, architecture, and socioeconomic forces collectively contributed to strengthening bilateral relations in Cold War era.

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architectural exchange;
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1. Introduction

Exchanges between China and Japan have a history of more than 2000 years and can be traced back to mythological records from ancient times (Kimiya 1980). However, as a structure of empires characterized by a pattern of the center, the periphery, and the subperiphery (Karatani 2014), the long-held master–pupil relationship between China and Japan underwent a drastic transformation in modern times. China – Japan relations in the 20th century have experienced wars and disruptions in diplomatic relations. In the Cold War era, the state of diplomatic affairs between China and Japan was subject to the conflict between the great powers of the U.S. and the Soviet Union. From this point forward, Japan indeed had a unique presence in the diplomatic history of New China. With the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s and the outbreak of the Vietnam War, Mao Zedong positioned Japan as a country “in the intermediate zone” in 1964 that should strive for cooperation against Soviet and American threats (Zhou 1997), and China and Japan eventually resumed diplomatic relations in 1972. Moreover, as an early modernized Asian country, Japan was seeking economic exchanges with China after World War II. Total trade between China and

Japan grew from the 1970s, and China replaced the U.S. as Japan’s largest trading partner in 2007 after China’s accession into the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Matsubara 2012). Thus, compared with exchanges between other countries in the Cold War era, including the U.S. and European countries, the nature of exchange between China and Japan was unique and important, not only in terms of geographic location but also because of strategic partnerships in geopolitics and economics and the long history of cultural exchanges.

Architectural activities in socialist China could not be separated from the political context. If China’s architectural exchanges with developing countries, such as India and those in Africa, are reflected mainly in China’s “output” aspects and its “donor” identity – architectural aid as a form of China’s foreign aid diplomacy (Cole 2015; Song 2021; Chang, Xue, and Ding 2019) – how should architectural exchanges between China and Japan be viewed? What were the respective claims of the two countries in a context in which communication was constrained due to ideological differences during the Cold War era? Political – economic culture is deeply involved in shaping the form of Chinese architecture, including

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national-style buildings in Beijing and other key cities (Wang 2003), “third-line construction” for war preparation in small towns of the hinterland (Tan et al. 2021; Zhu 2020) and the People’s commune movement in vast rural areas (Lu 2006; Yu and Nakatani 2021). These studies clearly revealed the multiple correlations between China’s architectural activities and its socioeconomic context from the perspective of practice and spatial production. As an important subtopic in the study of modern Chinese architectural history, architectural exchange beyond national borders was destined to be political. However, the interplay between geopolitics and architecture manifests itself in a more subtle and comprehensive way than at the practical level.

Although architectural exchanges between China and Japan were not completely terminated after World War II, as seen, for example, in the activities of Nishiyama Uzo, who visited China in 1960 and had a relationship with Liang (Ichikawa 2023), they undoubtedly remained restricted during this period. The exchanges peaked in the 1970s, when the political background of Sino-Japan friendship resumed. Moreover, with the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, the trajectory of China’s architectural development gradually merged with that of the world (Zou et al. 2010). In addition, moving into the 1980s and 1990s, China entered a phase of rapid urbanization driven by the market economy and continued to open to the outside world (Zhu 2009). In other words, the 1970s were unique and vital in both the political context and in terms of architectural background. For example, it witnessed a subtle shift in relations between China and the U.S., and American influence emerged in China’s architectural projects (Song and Zhu 2016). From a broader perspective, the 1970s was a decade of “bad reputation” (Borstelmann 2012): it was a period of concentrated global outbreaks of oil crises, environmental hazards, and the beginning of changes that heralded the contemporary world from ideology to economic globalization. Moreover, in the field of architecture, it was also the early period when modern architecture was exposed and postmodernism was on the rise (Mallgrave Harry F. and Goodman D. 2011). Some scholars have indicated that in the world discourse of the second half of the 20th century, the modernism of developing countries, including China, was not given due attention and should also be part of the legitimate and rational knowledge of mankind. This explains the tendency of the development of the world’s modern architecture to show more pluralism and respect for regional characteristics since the 1970s (Lu 2011). Hence, this study examines the history of architectural exchanges between China and Japan since the 1970s and analyzes their relationship with geopolitical dynamics. Through this historical review, the study identifies how Japanese architects’ interests in China evolved across different stages and,

in doing so, offers a reflection on Chinese architecture through the lens of the Other.

2. Research objects and methods

After World War II, numerous civic organizations were born to promote friendly exchanges between China and Japan. This type of civil diplomacy was carried out mainly through economic trade and cultural exchanges, which have special significance as a type of informal diplomacy (Shen 2005). The field of architecture is no exception. Among them, the Japan – China Society of Architecture and Building Technology (日中建築技術交流会, JCSABT), which was established shortly after the restoration of diplomatic relations between China and Japan, is one of the most influential organizations in the architectural field. However, its history, activities and legacy remain unexamined in current scholarship. This research analyzes the nature and influence of architectural exchanges between China and Japan since the 1970s by focusing on the activities of JCSABT. This study first reviews the history of JCSABT and specific activities between the two countries; for example, the theme and composition of the visiting delegation to China. Second, through reports on visits to China by Japanese architects, this study concludes the focuses on China held by Japanese architectural professionals from 1970s to 2000s. Finally, the study discusses the relationship among political context, cultural diplomacy, and modes of transnational circulation.

As historical research, this study uses mainly a survey of documentary materials and interviews. The literature research involved examining the *Nichi-Chu Kenchiku* [Japan-China Architecture], which is the official publication of JCSABT and official publications of the Architectural Society of China (ASC) and the Architectural Institute of Japan (AIJ). Additionally, interviews were conducted with former members of JCSABT to form a deeper understanding of the historical exchanges and their influence. Verbal informed consent was obtained from the relevant interviewees for the interviews in this article. No other ethical approval was required for this study.

3. The history, governance and influence of JCSABT

3.1. A brief history of JCSABT

With the help of the China – Japan Friendship Association, which had already been established, a general meeting for the establishment of JCSABT was held at the Tokyo Industry Club on 30 November 1973 (Figure 1). The meeting adopted a charter for society and formulated regulations that the purpose of the association is “to seek exchanges



Figure 1. Scene of the establishment of JCSABT, 1973. Source: *Japan-China Architecture*, No. 1.

between Japan and China on architectural academics, technology, and art and to contribute to the advancement of friendship between the architectural circles of the two countries". In addition to the members of the association, Li Lianqing, the counselor of the Chinese Embassy in Japan, officials from the Ministry of Construction of Japan, and the president of the Japan – China Civil Engineering Technology Exchange Association, also attended the general meeting. Additionally, *Renmin Ribao* [People's Daily] reported the establishment of this association on 8 December 1973, which reflected the importance that the Chinese government officially attached to it.¹

On the Chinese architectural circle side, in response to such a Japanese organization established in Japan, architect Yang Tingbao (1901–1982) first visited Japan on the eve of its establishment (18 June 1973) as the vice president of the ASC, held talks with members of AIJ and expressed the willingness of the Chinese architectural circle to support the association. After he returned to China, Yang presented a gift of his handwriting to congratulate the establishment (Figure 2). Like Liang Sicheng (1901–1972), in his later years, Yang Tingbao was active on the international stage as a representative of Chinese architects (Liu 2021). During his visit to Japan in 1973, Yang toured Japanese buildings and conducted architectural exchanges with Japanese architect representatives, such as Kenzo Tange (1913–2005, Figure 3). These historical facts reflect Yang's contribution to the architectural exchanges between China and Japan.

However, regarding the 30th anniversary of the founding of JCSABT, a resolution announcing the disbandment of the organization was published in the

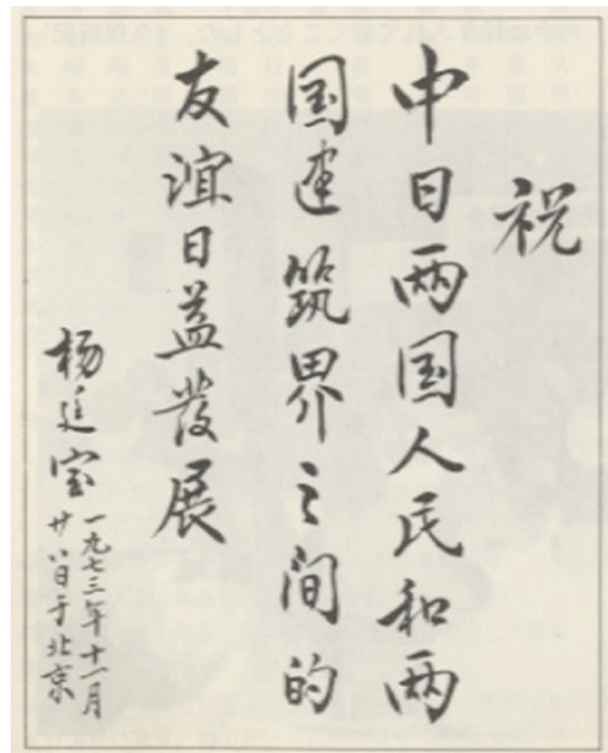


Figure 2. Handwriting by Yang Tingbao. Source: *Japan-China Architecture*, No. 1.

last issue of the organization's journal.² The decline in the number of JCSABT members and the corresponding financial constraints were also main factors. The most important reason is that the association has achieved the desired goal of promoting friendly exchanges between the architectural communities of the two countries during a difficult period; therefore, it is declared to be "finished."

¹Refer to *Japan - China Architecture*, No. 1, pp. 3-5.

²"with the advancement of China's reform and opening-up policy, the scope of exchanges between China and Japan gradually expanded and tended to be liberalized, as a result of which the Architectural Society of China ceased to organize visiting groups to Japan through JCSABT after 1996, and the activities were confined to the exchange of architectural publications and the dispatch of the annual inspection mission of the members of JCSABT to China" (*Japan-China Architecture*, No. 55 - 56, 2003).



Figure 3. Yang Tingbao (front row, third from left) with Tange Kenzo (front row, third from right) in front of Yoyogi National Stadium, 1973. Source: *the Complete works of Yang Tingbao*, Vol. 7, p. 311.

From 1973–2003, beginning at the end of the Cultural Revolution, through the Reform and Opening-up period, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union up to the turn of the century, the short 30-year history of the JCSABT spanned many milestones in modern history. What specific stages did it go through, and what activities did it organize?

3.2. The structure and significance of the JCSABT

As shown in Table 1, all presidents of the JCSABT, except the first and third presidents, held office for ten years. They were all architects and held a variety of important social positions, including three former presidents of the AIJ, one former president of the Architectural Association of Japan (AJA), and one who held important positions in numerous Japan – China

friendship organizations. This is a clear indication of the close relationship between the JCSABT and AIJ. Except the fourth president, Yoshitake Taisui, who took the initiative to apply for a replacement during his term of office, president replacement was rather passive and resulted from the sudden death of the sitting president, such as the first president, Kobayashi Masayoshi, who died less than a month into his term.

Among the former presidents, two had deep connections with China. The first is Yoshizaka Takamasa, the 33rd president of the AIJ (1973–1974), who directly contributed to the establishment of JCSABT and played a significant role in promoting architectural exchanges between China and Japan³ (Figure 4). As one of Le Corbusier's three Japanese acolytes, Yoshizaka's relationship with China can be traced back

Table 1. Presidents of the JCSABT.

	Name	Term of office	Profession	Other social position(s)	Note
1	Kobayashi Masaichi (1891–1973)	1973.11–1973.12	Architect	Former President of Chiba University, President of AIJ (1943–1944), etc.	
2	Yoshizaka Takamasa (1917–1980)	1974.1–1980.12	Architect	Professor of Waseda University, President of AIJ (1973–1974), etc.	
3	Ichiura Ken (1904–1981)	1980.12–1981.11	Architect	President of Japan Architects Association	Assumed the post of Acting President After Yoshizaka's death
4	Yoshitake Yasumi (1916–2003)	1982.1–1991.6	Architect	Professor Emeritus, University of Tokyo, President of AIJ (1977–1978), etc.	1991 Retirement – Re-election of the General Conference (<i>Japan-China Architecture</i> , No. 32)
5	Shimizu Masao (1921–2008)	1991.6–2003.6	Architect, ballet dancer	Director of the Matsuyama Ballet, Vice President of the National Headquarters of the Japan-China Friendship Association, etc.	Dissolution of the General Association in 2003 (Motion No. 5)

³For example, when Yoshizaka was inaugurated as president of the AIJ, he made the following inaugural speech at the regular New Year's meeting of the Japanese architectural community: "It is necessary to plan academic exchanges with China and North Korea, where diplomatic relations were restored last year. The Architectural Institute of Japan will be the center of this exchange, and we will build a foundation based on architectural relations" (refer to *The Daily Engineering & Construction News*, 1973.9).



Figure 4. Chairperson Yoshizaka's speech. Source: *The Daily Engineering & Construction News*, 1973.9.

to his undergraduate thesis (Yoshizaka 1984), "A Geographic Survey of the Inhabitants of North China, Mongolia, and Xinjiang," written during his time as a student at Waseda University. That relationship continued into his later career, when Yoshizaka visited China several times (Yu 2022) and left behind a multivolume diary of his visits to China. Yoshizaka's sustained interest in mainland China continued into the postwar period and directly contributed to the founding of JCSABT.

Another one is the fifth president, Shimizu Masao, who became famous early in China, and his fame transcended the architectural world because of his other social position. Shimizu was a ballet dancer and cofounder of Matsuyama Ballet, which adapted the traditional Chinese play "The White-haired Girl (白毛女)" in 1952 and performed many times in China. In contrast to his status as an architect and actor, Shimizu was essentially an important political figure (Figure 5)

who promoted Sino-Japanese friendship through music diplomacy (Zhang 2020), which is another form of civil diplomacy.

Most of the members of the JCSABT at that time were from the AIJ and many internationally renowned architects joined the association. For example, among the 269 regular members in the year following its establishment were Kenzo Tange and Fumihiko Maki. With respect to the origins of the members, the Japan-China Architecture Exchange Center was established in November 1961 in Kansai, with Uzo Nishiyama as its core figure. It consisted mainly of architectural groups active in Kansai, with no direct support from the AIJ, so it was soon dissolved (Ichikawa 2023). In other words, JCSABT's special relationship with the AIJ contributed to its greater size and influence in the Japanese architectural community.

Although some aspirants, such as Yang Tingbao, Yoshizaka, and Shimizu, wanted to promote friendly exchanges between China and Japan from the aspect of diplomacy. Why did other architectural experts join the JCSABT? Based on interviews with two members of the association, Japanese society became interested in modern China in the 1970s and was curious about new international trends, such as the new formation of a communist society. This was also a time when young people consciously thought about their futures. Also at this time, China and Japan were in a transition period from near isolation to formal restoration of diplomatic relations, and the JCSABT, as an important bridge for the architectural communities of the two countries, provided a rare opportunity to visit China and a shortcut to understanding Chinese society. This reflected a microcosm of the time when ideological differences in the second half of the 20th century during the Cold War brought about an urgent need for exchanges.

3.3. Architectural delegations organized by the JCSABT

The official publication of the JCSABT, *Nichi-Chu Kenchiku* [Japan-China Architecture], had a total of 56 issues and was published approximately twice per year since the Yoshizaka period (Figure 6). In addition to administrative affairs related to the association, the journal concentrated on reports of visits to China. The topics cover many aspects of Chinese society, such as clothing, food, housing, transportation, and the situation of the architectural industry.

Figure 7 shows a chronology of delegations to China overlaid with important historical events based on the contents of all 56 volumes of *Japan-China Architecture*, which shows that the JCSABT organized and dispatched 57 relevant delegations



Figure 5. Chairman Mao and other dignitaries having a meeting with Shimizu during the Matsuyama Ballet's visit to China in 1964. Source: *Japan-China Architecture*, No. 44.



Figure 6. Cover of the first issue. Source: *Japan-China Architecture*, No. 1, 1974.

to China over a 30-year period from 1973 to the early 2000s.⁴

According to chronology, this study provides an overview of the following aspects.

- (a) First, the number of delegations to China had been gradually decreasing since 1987, with one "Friendship delegation to China" as the

main mission per year and the number of international symposiums on various topics gradually increasing. Previously, there had been at least three delegations per year, each of which had a clear theme, such as materials, ancient architecture, and rural architecture.

- (b) Excluding the first visit (June 1974) led by Yoshizaka, which was via Hong Kong and then to an inland city, all subsequent visits to China were made by direct flights from Japan to major cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai. After 1974, the facilitation of customs clearance also greatly facilitated exchanges between China and Japan.
- (c) Destinations can be roughly categorized into two main parts depending on the main purpose of the visit to China. First, general "Friendship Visits to China Groups" were made mainly to important cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Zhengzhou, etc., and the objects of the inspections focused on the Forbidden City, Great Wall, Yuyuan Gardens, and other representative sights of various regions.⁵ In addition, before 1983, inspection targets often included rural communes, factories, air raid shelters, construction sites, and worker villages in various regions, as shown in the schedule of the First Member's Friendship Visit to China (Figure 8), which illustrates the appearance of China's great construction during the Cold War era. Second, there were visits to China with a special theme, such as the "Ancient Architecture Friendship Mission to China" (five visits in total). These visits included

⁴The whole delegations were obtained from the *Japan-China Architecture*, No. 55-56, 2003.

⁵Refer to the visiting group information on *Japan-China Architecture*, No. 2,4,5,6,8-15.

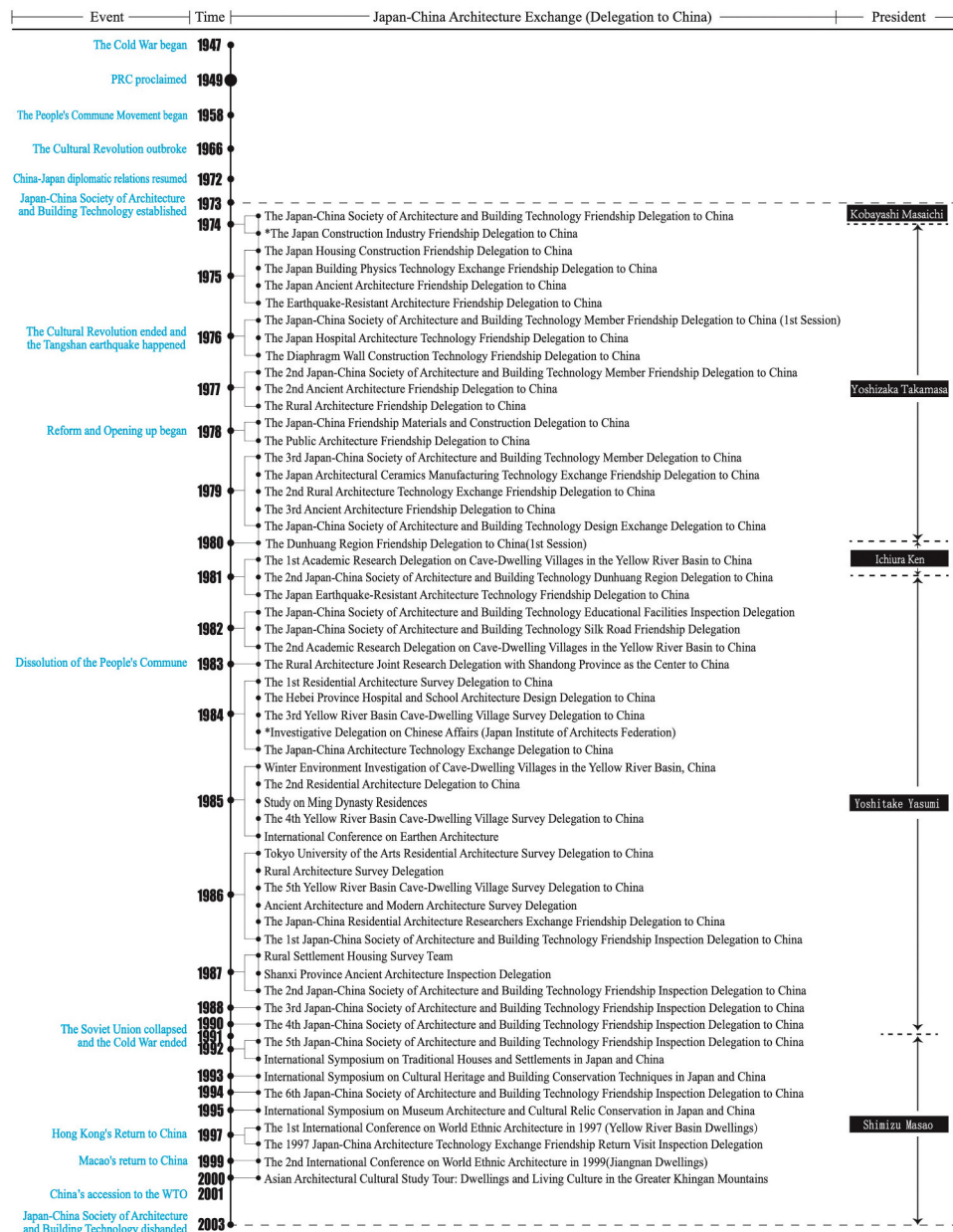


Figure 7. Japanese delegations to China from 1974–2003. Source: drawn by the author. * indicates delegations organized by other organizations (members of JCSABT have participated).

Datong, Shanxi Province, where many ancient Chinese buildings are located.⁶ The “Dunhuang Region Friendship delegation to China” (two visits), which had been organized since the 1980s, and the “Yellow River Basin Cave-Dwelling Village Survey Delegation” (5 visits) focused on investigating historical sites in northwest China, such as Gansu Province and Shanxi Province. The research team on China’s dwellings, led by Keiichiro Mogi⁷ (Tokyo University of the Arts)

since 1984, conducted investigations of China’s representative local houses, such as Huizhou-style buildings and Tulou buildings of Fujian Province, three times. There were also many other theme-specific tours related to the corresponding destinations.

(d) The delegation consisted of the head, deputy head, secretary-general, other “persons in charge,” and members of the delegation and the travel agency. Most delegations were led by the president of the JCSABT, directors, and

⁶Inagaki Eizo (1926–2001), a renowned Japanese architectural historian and professor emeritus of the University of Tokyo, was the core figure and led three delegations to China: the Ancient Architecture (1975.8.5–1975.8.19), the Study of Ming Dynasty Dwellings (1985.3.31–1985.4.7), and the International Symposium on Japanese-Chinese Cultural Properties and Construction Preservation Technology (1993.8.23–1993.8.25) delegations.

⁷Keiichiro Mochizuki (1928–2008), professor emeritus at Tokyo University of the Arts, was a Japanese architect who worked at Kenzo Tange’s office and, following his visit to China to investigate the situation, published a book on the subject with coauthors, *Exploring the Spaces of Chinese Folk Houses*.



other managers of the organization. Yoshizaka led the delegation five times during his lifetime. Members of the delegation for specialized topics were generally experts and scholars in the field, whereas the groups for general friendly exchanges were limited only to the number of members. There was no restriction on occupation or field. The visiting group was invited by the ASC in the early stage but was often openly solicited in the later stage.

⁸*Japan-China Architecture*, No. 25, 1988.

4.1. Overview of the China visit reports

First, in terms of the overall number of articles, using Volume 16 (the 10th anniversary issue) as the boundary, the first decade (1974–1983) saw a relatively large number of articles, with the number of articles in each volume fluctuating between 3 and 22. In the 20-year period from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, the number of articles in each volume, excluding the anniversary of the founding of the association and the special issues related to

⁹In the process of extracting keywords and categorizing the article that involves numerous topics, the core of the main points was categorized.:

Legend	Insights from visits to China	Materials, Technology, Construction • Seismic technology • Architectural ceramics manufacturing technology • Building materials, energy efficiency • Construction (architecture, interior) • Underground space development technology	Design, Contemporary Architecture • Residential buildings • Hospital buildings • Large-span public buildings	Urban and rural construction • Urban planning • Green construction • Hydraulic engineering • People's commune • Rural settlements
		Political, Socio-cultural • Chinese Terroir and Feng Shui • Social life style • Political background • Production (mode of livelihood) • Food, Customs	System, Organization • Building system • Architectural societies and research institutes • Primary, secondary and university education • Architect system • Management system	Historical relics, Traditional objects • Ancient City and ancient architecture • Landscape garden • Vernacular dwellings • Modern architecture • Traditional production tools
	Reference	Translated articles from other sources, e.g., <i>Architecture Journal</i> articles, books, etc.		
	Activity reports	Transactional notes for recording and reflecting on exchanges, "Reports on visits to China", "Symposiums", "Exchange Proposals", etc.		
	Memorial narrative	Commemorative articles, such as speeches on the development of the exchange program, events in the China-Japan exchange program, and tributes to architects.		

Figure 9. Types of articles in *Japan-China Architecture*. Source: drawn by the author.

visiting delegations and symposiums, the number of articles ranged from 2–5. According to the timeline in Figure 7, this may be related to the decrease in the number of delegations to China from the mid-1980s onward.

Second, in terms of the subjects of the articles, starting with the 17th and 18th volumes (released in 1985), the introduction of traditional Chinese historical sites, such as folk houses, ancient cities, and gardens, gradually increased. The style of the articles gradually shifted to more in-depth investigative essays. In contrast, during the 1970s, the first decade of Yoshizaka's era, the articles covered a wide range of topics related to China's social and cultural background, such as its land and culture, industry management system, and the construction of cities, towns, and villages.

4.2. The evolution of Japanese architects' focus

4.2.1. The first phrase (1970s): focus on the urban and rural construction in socialist China

From 1974 to 1979, Japan sent 19 delegations to China, addressing topics such as housing, building technology, seismic design, public architecture, and rural development. Moreover, during this period (No.1-No.11), numerous articles examined essential aspects of Chinese social life, including architectural systems, education, housing, and everyday customs. In sum, Japanese architects concentrated on the landscape of construction in socialist China during the 1970s. This reflected Japan's aspiration, as a capitalist nation, to understand the socialist model of construction. On the other hand, China was at a turning point between the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of the Reform and Opening-up periods. During this period, China's national economic construction momentum increased under the "Four

Modernizations," as shown in the "Landscaping," "Underground Bomb Shelters," "People's Communes," and "Workers' New Villages." These scenes of ambitious large-scale construction were precisely what China sought to present to foreign experts at the time. In short, the wartime separation fostered Japan's strong interest in societies functioning under different institutional systems. This interest was further intensified by the novelty of their first visit to mainland China following the diplomatic normalization.

4.2.2. The second phrase (1980s): focus on China's local cultural heritage

In the early 1980s, with the death of Yoshizaka, a new chairman, Ken Ichiura, was introduced to JCSABT. Ichiura expressed his interest in Dunhuang, China, at the beginning of the 12th volume of *Japan-China Architecture*. Since then, there was an increase in the number of tours to visit historical sites in China, represented by Dunhuang and the Silk Road. Moreover, Japanese scholarly attention turned toward the vernacular buildings of China, especially cave houses. From 1980 to 1987, five expeditions titled the "Yellow River Basin Cave-Dwelling Village Survey Delegation" and four missions on Chinese vernacular housing were sent to China. In *Japan-China Architecture* (No.12-No.23), articles on China's cultural heritage, including ancient artifacts and vernacular architecture, steadily increased. In terms of genre, these works gradually evolved from impressionistic accounts in the early phase to studies marked by empirical and research-oriented approaches. By the 1980s, Japanese architects had lost their fascination with the "radical transformations" of socialist China and turned their attention to China's indigenous and regional cultural heritage.

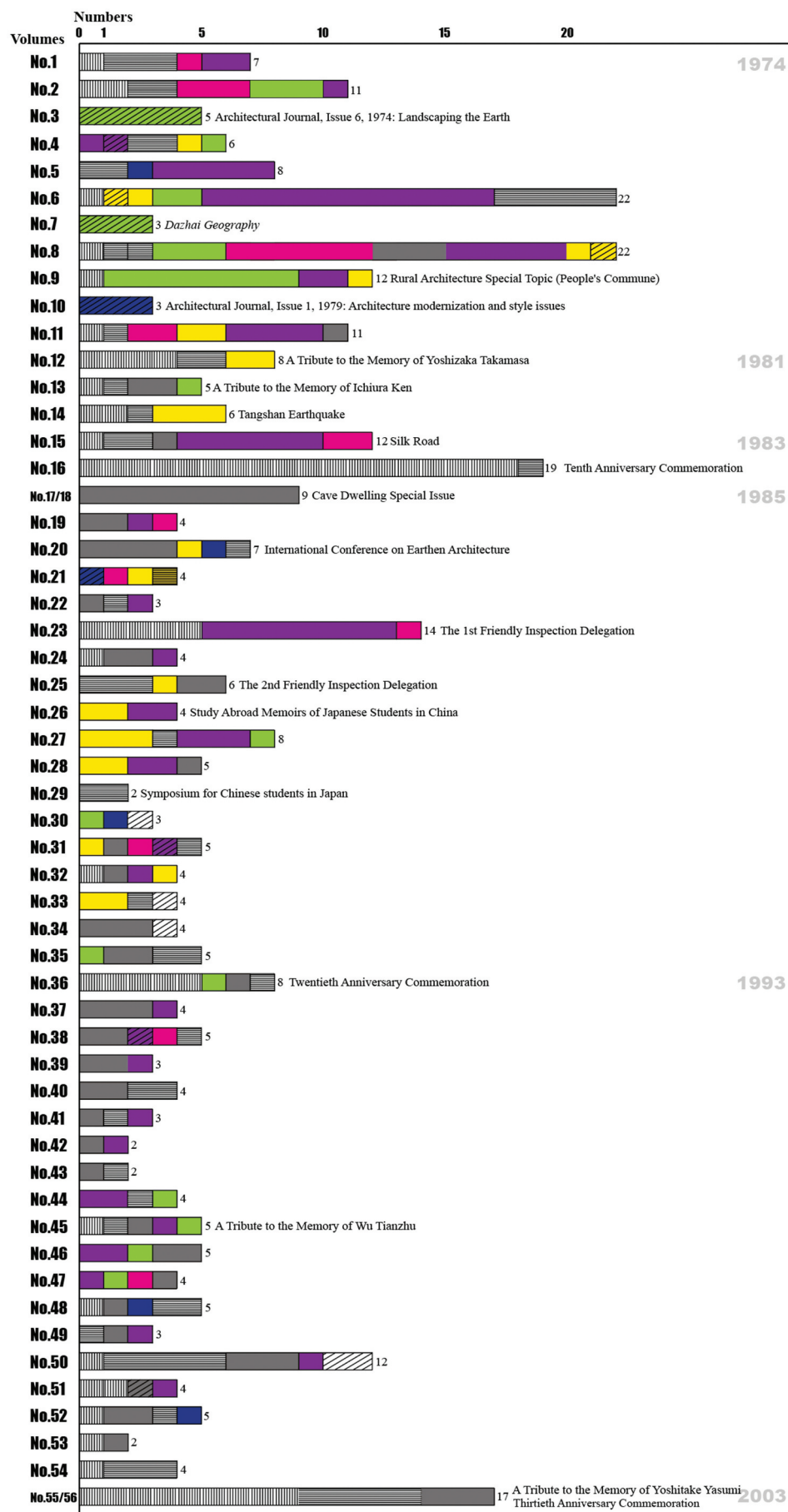


Figure 10. Evolution of article topics. Source: drawn by the author.

4.2.3. *The third phrase (from late 1980s to early 2000s): formulaic friendship visits with no explicit focus*

From 1986 to 2000, JCSABT sent six “Friendship Inspection Delegations” to China, while its other activities primarily involved international conferences. Moreover, in *Japan – China Architecture* (No.24-No. 56), the number of articles declined markedly, with few firsthand accounts of visits to China and an increasing emphasis on selected academic studies. These delegations largely took the form of formal goodwill visits, while the association’s official publications gradually reduced their coverage. Beginning in the late 1980s, Japan gradually lost interest in China and began to withdraw from the historical arena. This decline suggests that such official organizations as JCSABT were no longer necessary, as cultural exchange increasingly shifted to the public sphere, allowing individuals to engage more freely and directly. Meanwhile, with the deepening of the open-door policy, China gradually embarked on its modern transition toward a market economy during the 1980s. Chinese society adopted a more open stance toward the world, effectively integrating itself into the international community.

4.3. *The influences of the JCSABT*

4.3.1. *Architecture as an important channel for civil diplomacy*

If the *China-Japan Joint Communiqué* (1972) marked only the beginning of improved bilateral relations, then the *Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and China* (signed in 1978) formally established the normalization of relations at the legal and political levels. The JCSABT, established in 1973, directly participated in important historical events related to the normalization of Sino – Japanese relations, which played an important role in promoting Sino – Japanese friendship. This is the greatest historical contribution and impact of the JCSABT. From this perspective, architecture is a cultural form of diplomatic tool, and JCSABT was the vehicle through which this cultural form functioned. In other words, the goal of communication is “friendliness”. As Yoshizaka Takamasa has stated,¹⁰ only by working hand in hand can Japan and China forge a brighter future together.

4.3.2. *Facilitated the transnational circulation of knowledge*

Just like the knowledge of the architecture of the U.S. was absorbed and adapted in China (Song and Zhu 2016), knowledge is also presented in an explicit way on Sino – Japanese exchanges. JCSABT acted as the most important organization for transmitting knowledge during the

particular period of the 1970s (Shimizu 1985). This knowledge transfer extends not only within the organization but also to the entire Japanese architectural community. For example, the *Kenchichiku Zasshi* [建築雑誌, Journal of Architecture and Building Science], an official publication of the AIJ, compiled a special issue titled “Current Status of Chinese Architecture (中国建築の現状)” in its 1976 issue (No. 1102). These articles were authored by Japanese architects who visited China, with Takamasa Yoshizaka as a leading figure. Moreover, transnational circulation was reflected not only in the initial impressionistic accounts but also in subsequent collaborative studies on cultural heritage, including vernacular dwellings and ancient architecture. The outcomes of these exchanges were eventually presented to the academic community through international symposiums. At a time when personal visits remained difficult, JCSABT served as an official channel that effectively facilitated the dissemination of knowledge during the Cold War.

4.3.3. *Promoting the development of study abroad education*

Through JCSABT’s delegations to China, some Japanese students had access to Chinese universities and ultimately decided to study and research in China for a short period. The most representative among them was Tanaka Tan (1946–2012), a researcher on the history of Chinese architecture who went to China for short-term research at Southeast University in 1981. Before that, Tanaka had taken part in three ancient architecture tours organized by JCSABT to China: August 1975, August 1977, and October 1979. The experience of these three tours in China prompted Tanaka to go to China for research. In addition, other Japanese students studied at Chinese universities. For example, Yashiro Katsuhiko studied at Xi’an University of Architecture and Technology from 1986 to 1988 as a funded student of the Chinese government whose research object was Chinese *Cave houses*. On the other hand, JCSABT was equally supportive of Chinese students in Japan by organizing conferences for them and inquiring about their needs. Overall, JCSABT promoted opportunities for students from both countries to study abroad in the 1980s, corresponding to the boom in vernacular housing research at the time.

4.3.4. *Supporting China’s modernization with technology*

After World War II, Japan tried to repair its relations with neighboring countries through technical assistance and financial support (Xue, Sun, and Tsai 2011), and China – Japan relations were no exception. JCSABT was involved in similar projects that symbolized friendship between the two countries. The Japanese Prime Minister Ohira Masayoshi (1910–1980), who visited China in

¹⁰Yoshizaka Takamasa, 1976. What kind of children do shellfish give birth to? *Journal of Architecture and Building Science*, 1976 (91):4.



Figure 11. China – Japan Friendship Hospital. Source: *Japan-China Architecture*, 2003, No. 55-56, p. 36.



Figure 12. Chinese delegation to Japan studies Japanese architectural technology experience, 1973. Source: *the Complete works of Yang Tingbao*, Vol. 7, pp. 296–299.

December 1979, promised Chairman Hua Guofeng that Japan was willing to provide full assistance to China's medical modernization efforts. This endeavor culminated in the construction of the China – Japan Friendship Hospital in Beijing with Japanese assistance (Figure 11). The members of JCSABT, Yoshitake Taisui, and Ura Ryoichi were involved in the basic planning of the hospital project (Ito 2003). Ura Ryoichi visited China as early as 1976, focusing on developing an overall understanding of medical development in China, and presented the data in a report entitled "Friendship Visit to Hospital Buildings in China" (Ura 1976). Thus, it seems that the relatively large number of Japanese architects went to China was inseparable from the support of Sino – Japanese friendship exchange organizations such as the JCSABT. From this perspective, design entities such as Kurokawa and Nikken Sekkei were involved in projects for assisting China (Xue, Peng, and Mitchener 2009), whereas the JCSABT repre-

sented the academic community and acted as a catalyst and participant for in-depth cooperation.

In addition to these practical projects, JCSABT also provided technical assistance by hosting Chinese delegations visiting Japan. From 1975 to 1997, China dispatched several delegations to Japan, primarily composed of members of the ASC, to study Japan's advanced engineering technologies at institutions such as Shimizu Corporation and its technical research institute.¹¹ JCSABT played a mediating role in facilitating these exchanges. For instance, the engineering and technology delegation led by Yang Tingbao visited Japan in 1973, shortly before the establishment of JCSABT.¹² Over the course of a month, they examined Japan's high-rise construction technologies, new materials, and building equipment (Figure 12). Therefore, JCSABT supported Chinese architectural professionals in acquiring advanced technological knowledge.

¹¹Refers to *Japan-China Architecture*, No. 55-56, 2003. Based on the author's interview survey of ASC, no relevant documentation regarding China's delegations to Japan at that time has been found. Furthermore, the Japanese side only presented basic information about visiting groups in the appendix. Consequently, it has not been possible to elaborate more specifically on the technical support that China acquired from Japan.

¹²Yang's visit to Japan also provided an opportunity to meet with Japanese architects such as Takamasa Yoshisaka, securing support from China's architectural community for the establishment of the JCSABT.

5. Discussion

5.1. “Architectural diplomacy” before the end of history

The period from the Maoist era to the end of the twentieth century was a period of change and transition worldwide, a special time that was the eve of the end of world history (Fukuyama 1992). The international struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, China’s international policy, and the geopolitical relationship between China and Japan together formed the backdrop for exchanges between China and Japan.

Research on Sino – Japanese relations has long been state-centered, emphasizing the dominance of state power in diplomacy while neglecting the influence of civil society. Moreover, studies of cultural diplomacy have tended to focus on well-known narratives such as music and sports. As exemplified by “ping-pong diplomacy,” the small ball of table tennis once propelled the larger ball of diplomacy. However, the transnational circulation of architectural culture has received little scholarly attention in modern history.

Through an examination of JCSABT’s activities, this paper argues that “architectural diplomacy” played a crucial role in fostering Sino – Japanese friendship. Within the context of the Cold War, the interplay among state power, architecture, and socioeconomic forces collectively contributed to strengthening bilateral relations (Figure 13). First, at the state political level, China tried to unite the middle ground countries between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, whereas Japan tried to repair diplomatic relations with its neighbors. Second, in terms of economic development, although

China advocated “self-reliance,” it also tried to bring in advanced technology (Pete 2024, Jonathan 1999). Moreover, Japan was in dire need of developing overseas markets. In the context of such political and economic demands, a wide range of cultural exchanges between China and Japan took place in the 1970s, ranging from artistic fields such as music and architecture to the legal academy and so on (Zhao 2023). Although socialist China, particularly during the Mao Zedong era, was heavily influenced by politics and ideology, the borderless nature of culture subtly promotes diplomatic affairs. Architects such as Takamasa Yoshizaka and Yang Tingbao not only embodied Sino – Japanese friendship through “architectural diplomacy” during the Cold War but also advanced the transnational dissemination of knowledge.

5.2. The mutual demands behind friendly diplomacy

Beneath the surface of mutual cordiality, the substantive interests of both parties remained largely concealed. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the nation has consistently pursued modernization. In the 1950s, it received direct technical assistance from the Soviet Union (Li 2022). However, as Sino – Soviet relations deteriorated, China adopted the principle of “self-reliance.” Nevertheless, it continued to absorb advanced foreign technologies through diverse channels. Through JCSABT, China’s construction sector pursued this goal by engaging in practical projects and organizing study tours. Conversely, this raises the question: what were Japan’s actual interests? As an advanced nation at the time, why did Japan engage with a China that was still in the midst of development? Was it merely to promote friendly relations between the two countries?

The process of development unfolds in distinct stages, each presenting its own set of challenges. From this perspective, Japanese architects did not come to China in search of fleeting novelty or sensationalism but brought with them their own professional concerns. After experiencing a high level of economic growth in the postwar period (1945–1974) and facing global issues such as oil crises and environmental problems that arise in capitalist societies, Japanese society as a whole was in a period of introspection in the 1970s, and architecture was no exception. With economic and population growth, the gap between urban and rural areas in Japan gradually widened, and environmental problems continued to intensify. Coupled with limited land resources, the Japanese architectural community has grappled since the postwar period with the challenge of accommodating a growing population within a confined territory. The question of how to coordinate urban and rural development became their primary concern at

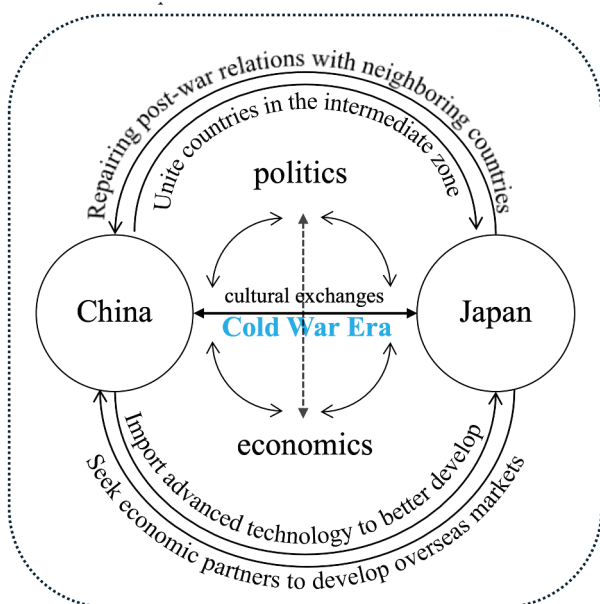


Figure 13. Correlation between architecture, geopolitics and diplomacy during the Cold War. Source: drawn by the author.

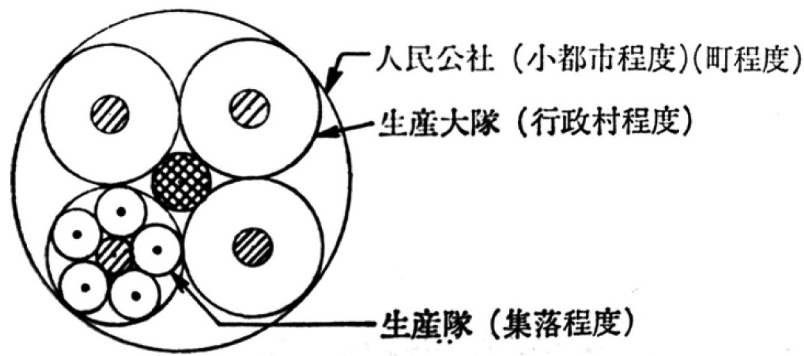


Figure 14. Diagram of the Chinese People's Commune drawn by Japanese architects. Source: Yoshizaka, T.; Institute, B. R.; Inc; center, C. D. Community-circle Planning Theory: a New regional Planning perspective; Agriculture and Forestry Statistics Publishing Inc, 1981.

the time. As early as 1962, the Japanese government formulated the "Comprehensive National Development Plan (全国総合開発計画)" to promote balanced regional development. And Japan introduced the "Settlement Circle Concept (定住圏構想)" in its Third Comprehensive National Development Plan of 1977 to revitalize local areas, particularly rural regions (Zhang 2013). And the "Settlement Circle Concept" was considered to be in line with the concept of China's people's commune by a member of JCSABT.¹³ Against this backdrop, Japanese architects paid particular attention to rural development in socialist China. They visited local people's communes in nearly every region they traveled to within China. The journal *Japan-China Architecture* featured a full Chinese translation of "*Geography of Dazhai*"¹⁴ and dedicated its ninth volume to a special report on China's rural construction. Taking Takamasa Yoshizaka as an example, he directly expressed his expectations for China's rural development on the cover of this special issue (中国農村特集).¹⁵ Moreover, in academic works published after Yoshizaka's death,¹⁶ he positioned China's rural people's communes as an ideal regional planning model to resolving urban-rural contradictions (Figure 14). He juxtaposed China's People's Commune with the Soviet *kolkhoz* (колхоз) and Perry's *Neighborhood Unit* as models of ideal communities, thereby situating the People's Commune within a broader historical and global context.

In the 1970s, as the Western world began to critique modern architecture, this intellectual shift prompted architects to focus on vernacular and regional building traditions. From the 1980s onward, JCSABT also undertook extensive research and documentation of China's

vernacular architecture.¹⁷ Meanwhile, with the dissolution of the People's Commune system in 1983 and the implementation of China's opening-up policy, exchanges between China and Japan became increasingly unrestricted. Consequently, beginning in the 1980s, Japanese architects began to recognize the limitations of the People's Commune system. They shifted their focus from ideologically examining construction projects under the socialist system to adopting a global perspective in studying China's cultural heritage. In short, beneath the veneer of diplomatic cordiality, Japanese architects came to China in search of solutions to the challenges of their time. This pursuit was closely connected to prevailing international architectural trends and Japan's domestic development policies.

6. Conclusions

Thirty years of cultural exchange between China and Japan, from a history spanning over a thousand years, is a short period, but it also has a heavy impact. Citizens of every nation inevitably harbor certain prejudices toward other peoples, while simultaneously falling prey to dogmatic views of their own culture. Through exchange, mutual understanding is deepened. More importantly, misunderstandings and prejudices are gradually being eliminated. Moreover, comparison enables us to reflect upon and re-examine one's own national culture.

The purpose of this study was to review the history of architectural exchanges between China and Japan in the last three decades of the 20th century to reveal the historical contributions made

¹³Refers to *Japan-China Architecture*, No. 8, p. 19, 1978.

¹⁴Xiyang County, Dazhai Geography Writing Group. *Geography of Dazhai*(大寨地理). Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1975.

¹⁵The development path that China is now practicing to raise the standard of living of its people is neither Euro-American nor Soviet but is something uniquely Chinese, the roots of which can be traced in the post-revolutionary landscape of rural China. *Japan-China Architecture*, No. 9, 1978.

¹⁶Yoshizaka, T.; Institute, B. R.; Inc; Center, C. D. Community-circle Planning Theory: A New Regional Planning Perspective; Agriculture and Forestry Statistics Publishing Inc, 1981.

¹⁷This is not unrelated to the dissemination and influence of Rudovsky's "Architecture without Architects" in Europe, the U.S., and Japan (the Japanese edition was published in 1984, which introduced Chinese cave houses).

by the Japan – China Society of Architecture and Building Technology and other architectural societies of the two countries, such as the AIJ and ASC, to the China – Japan friendship under the Cold War. Within contemporary Chinese architectural discourse, debates over modern architecture and anxieties about cultural identity have kept mainstream narratives fixated on Chinese modernism. This phenomenon has created a bottleneck in the study of modern architectural history, manifesting in an excessive preoccupation with modernism while largely neglecting issues such as rural development and urban-rural integration.

This paper presents a new perspective on China's modern architectural practices from a comparative cultural studies standpoint, with particular attention to the modernization of rural China. However, the limited availability of well-documented materials on the Chinese delegations to Japan and China's perceptions of Japan creates a significant gap in pursuing a more comprehensive comparative analysis from both the host and guest perspectives. Future research will focus on Takamasa Yoshizaka, examining the interplay among individuals, nations, and the global context of cultural exchange through the lens of an architect's personal experience. This approach aims to trace and interpret the mutual influence in cultural exchange more specifically.

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Author contributions

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Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and appendices.

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