It seems that researching Chinese Architecture is against the trend of the times. China has been experiencing tremendous changes in recent years, in which almost everything is tending to Westernization. Our society is destroying Chinese traditional architecture as well as its art and technology. It is awful that we disdain and dislike our own traditional arts and crafts, yet we have no ability or criterion to appreciate the newly imported western art and technology. Since “Western-style” architecture emerged and became widely popular in treaty port cities, both the magnates and the middle class loved its novelty, and regarded traditional Chinese architecture as old and outdated. Although they had no intention to destroy it, many elegant examples of Chinese architecture have been replaced by so-called Western-style buildings, which are low-quality and immature imitations. It is a pity that the appearances of some key cities are chaotic, with ugly buildings lacking artistry scattered here and there, almost fifty percent of the cityscape has been modified or demolished. People don’t seem to regret the fact that the grand and beautiful cityscape in pure traditional Chinese style has either been totally destroyed or kept in only a small scale. Centuries-old historic landmarks and beautiful streets with distinct local character, which are the remarkable embodiment of our national culture, have often been sacrificed under the banner of “renovation (amelioration)”. The following case, which happened last year in a county of Gansu Province, is a really regrettable story. In order to widen streets and “rebuild” the city, the mayor demolished countless existing traditional buildings and gateways which were beautifully built and carved. But there was no real need to do it that way. Such kind of man-made demolition, is as heartbreaking as that caused by war. The majority of people seem to turn a blind eye to it, and it has become a usual practice in the last thirty years.

To a degree, it is unavoidable that new buildings take the place of old ones during the process of municipal development. There are three main reasons for the unusually high rate and expansion of the destruction of traditional buildings in China, even before the Anti-Japanese war broke out: Firstly, the economic situation was becoming so weak, that local governments had no ability to do anything to prevent those state-owned temples and feudal official buildings in poor condition from collapsing. Secondly, there were no criteria for evaluating the significance of Chinese traditional architecture. As a result, traditional buildings, whether private houses,
gardens or shops were torn down in great quantities and replaced with Western ones. Thirdly, neither the government nor the common folk regarded traditional architecture as a cultural relic and heritage, and no one cherished it.

Perhaps we lack enough power to stop the trend of destruction before it is too late. The construction that is replacing it will take some time to progress into an elevated art, and to be perfected as a body of knowledge and technology. This development seems inevitable following an intrinsic logic of cause and effect. Fortunately in the meanwhile, the consciousness of national culture has been emerging. Some people have been engaged in scholarly work, collecting objects, doing field surveys and researching their origin and history, etc. All these activities are necessary contributions that will form the basis of new developments based on traditional culture. Over the course of two thousand years, Chinese traditional architecture has formed into a set of unique construction techniques and established an integrated art system as well. It is a remarkable legacy that embodies our splendid culture. To re- evoke the Chinese nationality, we must respect and preserve our culture and history. Research into Chinese traditional architecture should not be neglected if we want to indentify and preserve the legacies of various ages.

Scholarly surveying and researching is one way to stir society’s preservation consciousness. This will reduce demolitions gradually, though it won’t stop them entirely. Such research may seem to run against the trend of our times, but quite the contrary, it is as urgent a task as saving famous paintings and treasured antiques from a fire. It is indeed a sacred obligation to cherish our valuable heritage.

For thousands of years in feudal China, traditional arts such as calligraphy, paintings, inscriptions on ancient bronzes and stone tablets, were admired and appreciated greatly by the literati and officialdom (scholar-bureaucrats), no less than prose and poetry. Which in my opinion, is the force that has driven the continuous development of our traditional cultural spirit. Only architecture was much less studied than the other traditional arts, perhaps because skilled craftsmen built it, working with inherited styles, which they transformed spontaneously. Our situation is similar to that of Europe before the Renaissance. These anonymous craftsmen created so many amazing wonders for the world, but they did not produce a theoretical system to interpret or disseminate what they created. Thus, in ancient China, people had no cognitive framework for appreciating their predecessors’ architecture objectively. Each succeeding dynasty either demolished the splendid architecture built by its predecessor or engaged in such radical renovations that they were tantamount to demolitions. The new authority had no interest in the old buildings, and few people were sufficiently knowledgeable to argue for their protection. This pattern repeated itself from the Sui and Tang Dynasties to the Ming and Qing Dynasties. People renovated traditional architecture, changing its appearance and content arbitrarily, without concern for its original style. Take temples for example. Some were preserved in name only, with their appearance randomly modified. The treatment of architecture was totally different from how ancient paintings and calligraphy were cared for, a disparity we should pay attention to and rethink. This situation worsened after the western-style architecture during the late Qing Dynasty. At that point the destruction
was amplified from individual buildings to entire cities.

Without objective criteria for evaluating historic significance and without regulations for preservation, every artwork in the world would eventually be destroyed by later generations because of changes in political regimes or taste. Western countries started to preserve old architecture relatively recently. Traditional Western architecture was regularly destroyed before 19th century. What survived did so by chance and because it was built with durable materials. The West’s preservation consciousness arose in the mid 19th century with the emergence of archeology, which set out objective and scholarly research methods for the study of antiques and architecture. During World War II, the Allied armies brought in preservation experts who were responsible for protecting traditional architecture even in occupied territories and enemy countries. But in China, demolishing the old is the order of the day. This is not the time for detached contemplation. We must actively build an intellectual foundation for preserving traditional architecture, and its associated arts of carving and fresco, so that more and more can learn to appreciate them objectively. Research is absolutely essential to this task.

[...]

We would best contribute to our identity by preserving our traditional grand buildings, trees along the streets, courtyards in front of official buildings and beautiful archways, etc, rather than building a cement replica of a Western style fountain or monument. The stone monuments in Western cities are magnificent because their construction was perfected over a long history, something we cannot accomplish in a single day. The monuments recently inserted in our cities are blind copies and look foolish. What our architects should do, is to explore the treasure mine of Chinese art and culture and take our legacies as important references. For instance, the Han Dynasty’s watchtower (Que), Southern-North Dynasty’s carving, Tang and Song’s pillars with Buddhist lections and josses, Ming and Qing’s decorated archways, and the layout of pavilions, ponds, screen walls (Yingbi), stone tablets (Shibei) and commemorative pillars (Huabiao), etc. All these, if researched in-depth, could inspire contemporary architectural design.

Research into traditional architecture can help cultivate an aesthetic appreciation upon which to forge a unique architecture, which could in turn be developed into various styles using different materials such as timber, stone, concrete and steel. Take International Style architecture as an example: various countries including Britain, France, America, the Soviet Union, Holland, Japan and so on, developed their distinct version of the International Style which was suitable to their individual environment. Our profound tradition of art and culture constitutes a rich source for many possible future developments. Thus conceived, a new modern Chinese architecture and urban planning can emerge and have a bright future of great achievements.

To prepare the ground for that bright future we should survey, collect and analyze the valuable materials of traditional architecture.

We must urgently document traditional architecture of various styles through surveys, drawings, interviews and photographs. This research work is a race against
demolition, since many historic buildings are in imminent danger. Surveys and case studies are the basis for scholarly research, and can help improve the social consciousness of preservation. In addition, analyses of traditional construction methods are also essential work, much like studying the grammar of a language. There existed several treatises on the methods governing traditional construction, such as *Construction Standards (Ying Tsao Fa Shih)* written by Li Jie during the Song Dynasty, *Engineering manual for the Board of Works (Gongbu Gongcheng Zuofa Zeli)* written during Qing Dynasty and *Lu Ban’s Manual book (Lu Ban Jing)* widely employed by craftsmen. The elements and details of construction recorded in these books must be translated and illustrated clearly through modern diagrams. They must be analytically compared to field surveys in order to establish the artistic value of buildings, and their styles have been transformed over time. Our architects could gain new insights by re-studying the old. Armed with knowledge of both modern technology and tradition, their creativity will surely improve. This is the most significant reason why we must research Chinese architecture.