A measure of Liang Sicheng’s (1901-1972) unstoppable determination to preserve China’s traditional buildings is that he published this call to research amidst a drowning chorus of calls to war. He wrote it while on the run, living in a temporary settlement. WWII had forced him to flee his home with his wife and collaborator, architect Lin Huiyin, and their two young children. He did not want the war to interrupt a major research project he was conducting, along with colleagues of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture (est. 1931), to identify surviving traditional timber framed buildings throughout China. Documenting and preserving historic buildings was important, not just for a few academics, but for the very survival of Chinese culture from the twin threats of Westernization, and if one reads between the lines, Japanese imperialism. Liang argued, in what is considered one of the founding essays of Chinese preservation, that for Chinese culture to survive, it was imperative to preserve its historic timber buildings, because only they could be used as reliable lessons from which to develop a truly Chinese modern architecture and culture, free from foreign entanglements. His nationalist agenda must be balanced against the fact that his thinking on architecture and preservation was quite Western, and his life quite cosmopolitan. Born in Tokyo, Empire of Japan, to parents living in exile from China for political reasons. The family returned to China in 1912, but Liang and Lin left in 1924 to study architecture under the French Beaux-Arts architect Paul Cret at the University of Pennsylvania, where Liang became interested in architectural history. In 1928, they went back to the Northeastern University in Shenyang, then under Japanese control, to found the second school of architecture in China, and the first to implement a Western curriculum. Through their teachings, research and professional projects, Liang and Lin pioneered both modern Chinese architecture and preservation. After the war in 1949, Liang became a professor at Qinghua University in Beijing. The thrust of Liang’s argument for preservation was that the act of building is a defining aspect of culture. It evolves gradually over centuries, as it is transmitted from generation to generation. Radical breaks in that transmission can only result in disastrous cultural collapse. Liang recognized that illiterate artisans, who had transmitted China’s building culture orally, now lacked the commissions to continue working. Preservation, he argued, now had to bear the responsibility for cultural transmission by documenting and disseminating the knowledge of traditional buildings. Significantly, Liang did not turn to artisans as the source of authority, but rather to ancient pattern books, which he analyzed with scholarly rigor and used as the basis for establishing the relative value and sophistication of historic buildings. In the mid 1960s, while Director of Architecture at Tsinghua University, Liang’s ideas about cultural continuity drew the fury of Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution. They accused him of “counter-revolutionary scholarship.” His circle of colleagues was purged from the university, sent to rural provinces, and forced into manual labor as part of the infamous “Down to the Countryside Movement.” Publication of his major studies of Chinese architectural history—particularly a massive study of the Song Dynasty Yingzao Fashi (Treatise on Architectural Methods)—was forestalled by censorship. His manuscripts were kept secretly by colleagues, and published posthumously.

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