
Caroline Bodolec

[Caroline Bodolec is senior researcher with the French National Scientific Research Center (CNRS) at the Centre d’études sur la Chine moderne et contemporaine (UMR 8173 Chine, Corée, Japon). Her field of research focuses on intangible cultural heritage and on the appropriation of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention of UNESCO (2003) in China. She conducts fieldwork studies over the northern part of the country, especially in Shaanxi and Shanxi provinces. She also works on the history of construction and the anthropology of techniques during late imperial and contemporary China. She has published several articles in those topics and a book entitled La voûte dans l’architecture chinoise: Un patrimoine méconnu (Maisonneuve et Larose, 2005). She is co-author of a documentary made with Elodie Brosseau entitled Yaodong, little treaty of construction, 89’, EHESS & AnimaViva production that won the Intangible Cultural Heritage Award at the 31st Festival of Ethnographic Film Jean Rouch in 2012 and the second prize at the Festival du Film de chercheurs, Nancy, 2014. Dr. Bodolec website is at http://cecmc.ehess.fr/document.php?id=1394. Contact: caroline.bodolec@ehess.fr]

In this ambitious 304 pages book, Feng Jiren aims to locate the most famous manual on Chinese architecture—the Yingzao fashi 造法式 of Li Jie 李诫 (1035-?) published in 1103—in its historical context (the Song dynasty) and its philological and sociological environment. As Feng points out in his introduction, the manual is one of the most studied by Chinese and Western scholars since the early twentieth century, and is considered as the acme of technical knowledge on Chinese architecture. Feng shows that this book is not just a technical and practical manual, but also a work of erudition in the most classic sense. As the writer says, (p. 8) Li Jie “by tracing contemporary building methods back to precedents in the classics and earlier authoritative texts, […] claimed the legitimacy of the building standards he was presenting to the court and to all readers in society.” Feng emphasizes the underlying cultural elements in the technical nomenclature, and especially (p. 12) “the impact of literature and the arts on the creation of architectural terminology and the relationship between craftsmen and literati in this domain.” The Yingzao fashi (YZFS) has rarely been regarded from these perspectives. In this sense, the Feng’s work is most welcome.
The book is divided into five chapters plus seven appendixes, a very comprehensive bibliography and a useful index. In the text, the author includes 80 illustrations from the Ming editions of the YZFS—no Song illustrations have survived—as well as architectural plans, illustrations from other manuals and classics, and photographs of extant wooden buildings. A surprisingly short conclusion (2 pages) completes the work.

In the first two chapters, totaling nearly 85 pages, Feng draws up the inventory of the ancient writings quoted by Li Jie in his preface to the YZFS. He investigates the Classics and the “terms of architecture” (or those which can be interpreted as such) from antiquity to the mid-tenth century in order to better understand what writings were available at that time and how they could have influenced Li Jie. He then concludes the first chapter (“The Historical Tradition of Writing on Architecture: From Antiquity to the Mid-Tenth Century”) by acknowledging that in the pre-Song period, architecture and its components were mainly presented in the context of ritual order and the hierarchical positions of the emperor and his subjects. Feng explains that almost every aspect of the Chinese architectural system (technical elements and decorative features included) described in the texts were considered only in association with the status of the building’s owner. It was not until the tenth century that writings which mingled technical knowledge from craftsmen with architectural norms needed by the administration emerged.

The first manual of this type was the Mujing 木經 (Classic of Timberwork) a currently lost three-chapter unofficial manual attributed to Yu Hao 喻皓 (965-989). This manual, with an abundance of constructive calculations relatively complicated to understand, had apparently mesmerized Song scholars, who quoted the text in their own écrits au fil du pinceau. It should be noted that the only preserved passage of this text can be found in the Mengqi bitan of Shen Gua. Its influence during the early Song period is discussed by Feng in chapter 2 (‘From the Mujing to the Yingzao fashi: The Rise of Building Manuals and the Construction of Architectural Knowledge’). The author sees in this text a first attempt to link practical knowledge and administrative needs for a wider audience. The YZFS belongs to the same methodological and historical trend. One of the main ideas of the book is introduced here thus (p. 61): “With the appearance of these manuals, written architectural knowledge began to be circulated among the public, available to craftsmen, officials, and scholars.” Here, he assumes that the craftsmen themselves are the recipients of these writings through a dialogue between scholars and professionals. This working hypothesis, which is a central theme of the book, raises a certain number of questions that will be developed further in this review.

Far from restricting his analysis only to the Mujing, Feng is also interested in other types of manual produced or published before the YZFS
presented as (p. 76) “intellectual preparation for the production of State Building Standards.” He thus considers a work on ritual with illustrations (the *Xinding Sanlitu* 新定三禮圖 [Newly Examined Illustrations [of the Ritual Systems] in the Zhouli, the Yi and the Li] (962)); an imperial compilation of encyclopedias (the *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 [Imperially Inspected Encyclopedia of the Taiping Era] (983)), and even a commentary of the oldest Chinese dictionary (the *Erya shu* 「雅雅 [Commentaries on the Erya] (999)). He conscientiously demonstrates that they can be seen as “prerequisite for the treatment of traditional architectural literature in the terminology section of the *YZFS*” (p. 87). Meanwhile, he highlights the influence of official manuals devoted to a specific subject, such as the *Dili xinshu* 地理新書 (New Book on [Geomantic Arts for] Geographical Features of Sites; 1071), the *Wujing zongyao* 武經總要 (Essentials of the Military; 1044), and the *Xiucheng fashi tiaoyue* 修城法式條約 (Regulations on Standard Methods of City Construction; 1075). The specificity of the *YZFS* is thus thoroughly introduced, and the context of the Emperor Shenzong’s order for an official building standard clarified (p. 99).

The next three chapters (112 pages) are more specifically devoted to the *YZFS* itself. The author begins by considering Li Jie’s intentions in compiling the manual, and aims at demonstrating that (p. 101) “he intended this building manual for a broader audience than merely the imperial court and local administratives in charge of construction.” In Chapter 3, entitled ‘The Making of [a] Widespread Legitimated Building Knowledge,’ Feng goes even further, as he hypotheses that Li Jie (p. 101) “must have aimed to spread architectural knowledge to all society … officials, men of the letters, and even craftsmen, who perhaps improved their skills by referring to it …” This rather bold assumption is not without merit, but considering the limited sources available to support it, somewhat speculative. Feng mainly seeks information from the *YZFS*. He reminds us that Li Jie explained that he was commissioned to revise a previous version of the manual that had been rejected by the Emperor Zhezong because of its weakness in two main areas (p. 102): “the comprehensiveness of its content … [and] the feasibility of the rules for managing material and labor needs and preventing … officials from practicing graft.” These two important aspects were emphasized in the new version approved by the Emperor Huizong as the numerous extracts quoted prove. The *YZFS* can thus be seen as a useful manual establishing regulations for the inspection of public works that allowed the state to check the technical problems as well as consumption of materials. Indeed, by reading the table of contents we can well imagine that the precise specification of building techniques aimed to (p. 109) “help officials to evaluate and examine the quotas, inspect craftsman’s work, differentiate between refined and ordinary work and pay reasonable rates for both types, and eventually apply the rules more effectively than they otherwise would
be without adequate knowledge of architecture.” It is therefore not a manual intended to rest in an imperial library. Li Jie even indicates that he wrote his book by drawing on two sources of information: classical texts and practical methods that (p. 109) “had been in transmission among craftsmen for a long time and had been feasible methods over time” (自來工作相傳，並是經久可以行用之法).

Feng therefore concludes—maybe a bit hastily in my opinion—that Li Jie (p.109) “acquired these practical methods through detailed oral accounts by experienced craftsmen of all systems and through careful discussions with them on architectural principles and the advantages and disadvantages of all systems.” Feng meticulously traces the classical sources of technical terms (49 of 293) for periods prior to the Qin to the Northern Song (pp. 115-123), but he devotes a large part of this chapter (pp. 123-137) to the question of the correspondences between techniques described in the manual and real architecture. He literally jumps across time and focuses on the relations of styles, techniques and decorations between the illustrations in the YZFS and the Northern Song buildings still extant today. I should repeat that no Song illustrations have survived, all now dating from the Ming editions of the manual. The task is complex because only very few architectural elements can be dated with certainty back to the Song. Many structures were more or less identically rebuilt during the Ming and the Qing. And even though the author can, on several occasions, show that there is actual correlation between the text and reality, we detect some wavering in the argument when he has to note that (p. 128) “[y]et not all actual methods of Song times were summarized and recorded in this treatise.” Indeed, archaeological evidence reveals several techniques not recorded in the manual. It seems to me somewhat regrettable that the author did not look into these missing techniques more thoroughly, simply describing them as “an unorthodox method in Song building practices” (p. 129). His only hypothesis is (p. 128) “[t]he reason for excluding this building method from the state building manual was probably because it was restricted largely to local areas.” His belief in the universality and comprehensiveness of the techniques compiled in the YZFS is great (p. 129): “even though the Longxing Monastery received imperial patronage in the early Northern Song period, the angled-arm construction was not valued as an effective building method to be included in the dynasty’s building standard.” This conviction prevents him from questioning (even just a little) Li Jie’s assertion that he (p. 136) “discussed with highly experienced craftsmen of all systems and carefully examined the rules” (與諸作詣會經歷造作工匠，詳悉講究規矩) in order to choose only legitimated methods, the ones which had proven to be feasible. Following this argument, the architectural evidence one can observe nowadays (p. 137) “may have been judged ‘illegitimate’ or ‘unfeasible over time’ and thus excluded from his official,
orthodox, legitimated building standard.” This judgment has not stood the test of time, since it is precisely these which have survived through the centuries!

The two final chapters of the book are linked together not only because they both deal with architectural terminology (‘The Yingzao fashi Architectural Terminology (I) and (II)’), but also because they both have the same purpose: to highlight the socio-cultural contexts of the architectural terms quoted in the manual. The first part (pp. 138-180) is focused on the relations between the bracketing system and the semantic field of flowers, branches and foliage. Indeed, Feng questions the omnipresence of floral vocabulary which brings to mind poetry more than technique. In order to explain how bracketing was perceived to be like flowers or flowering trees in Song times, Feng wants to (p. 142) “consider whether such imagery was shared by different social groups and what kind of architectural conceptualization it was associated with.” Once more, he examines with extreme attention the literature available at that time (dictionaries, poems, travel notes and biji …) to show that (p. 150) “during the Song period, people of different regions all used botanically derived terms for bracketing.” He also endeavors to show the pragmatism of this particular vocabulary through a series of sketches that relate an architectural element to its botanical reality (figures 4.12, 4.13 and 4.14 but also 4.21 and 4.22). Could we not imagine that it is through the imitation of the form of branches and the location of the flowers on branches that the bracketing system was conceptualized? Even if not every term for bracketing in the YZFS is associated with flowers and trees, Feng demonstrates very convincingly (p. 168) that “only the botanical nomenclature constitutes a powerful and systematic architectural metaphor involving a group of terms under a coherent theme and covering all fundamental aspect of a bracket set: from protruding elements to lateral elements, from combinations of these elements to composite units.” Thus, there was a mode of technical thought intimately tied to the natural world that would explain the extraordinary correlation between the terms found in sources (from the pre-Han to the Song) and the terms said to be collected by Li Jie in the field from illiterate craftsmen. For Feng, (p.179) “[t]he concept of natural trees and branches in Chinese architecture must have been implanted in the minds of the builders” and he is convinced that (p. 180) “[s]uch vivid architectural metaphors must have played an important role in the professional communication, teaching, and learning of architectural technologies and building practices in China of the tenth to twelfth centuries.”

The question then arises of how craftsmen and scholars reached such an identical perception of architecture? This is the subject of the second part devoted to architectural terminology (pp. 181-212): ‘The Interplay of Literature, Art and Craftsmanship.’ This part caused me reflect deeply as an
historian and ethnologist of building techniques. Indeed, Feng, as he had already introduced on p. 61, develops the arguments of one of the main ideas of the book—that a major cultural proximity between scholars and building craftsmen existed in Song times. To prove this assertion, he extracts a number of technical terms and shows that they can be compared to similar terms used in poetry or in painting at the same period. Let us turn our attention to the example developed from pp. 182 to 190: the terms quoted in the YZFS were not only inspired by the observation of nature, but also by the poetic vocabulary used in ci poems. Based on this idea that craftsmen, sensitive to the genre were themselves authors of poems, (p. 193) “[they], however, not only were professionally skilled, but, in a culturally brilliant society like Song China, they also could be literate.” For Feng (p. 193), “the invention of printing during the Northern Song period … made mass literacy possible,” and would have even raised awareness of nuances within the genre. To prove this assertion, he seeks to show the links between two technical terms linggong (shorter arms) and mangong (longer arms) with the two main types of ci lyrics: lingci (short poem) and manci (long poem). By proving that the architectural terms linggong and mangong did not exist before the Tang period, and that the ci lyrical genre flourished during the Song period, then (p. 190) “when the need arose for identifying bracket arms by their lengths, the words ling and man would have to come to mind.” For me, from my field experience studying construction sites and artisanal skills, this idea seems somewhat off-beam. Indeed, even if this assertion is not wholly unfounded, why presuppose that the idea to link the names came to the craftsmen’s minds and not to Li Jie himself? Might we not imagine that he tried to translate them into a language understandable by all scholars of his time, language that allowed a rapid mental visualization of the items to check on-site? Fully aware of technical complexity and probably a very good teacher, Li Jie may have achieved a remarkable synthesis of the two groups’ know-how. Without any further evidence to prove the educational level of Song craftsmen or the reality of the relationship between scholars and craftsmen than a philological study of the YZFS or some quotations from scholars’ writings, it is difficult not to compare this hypothesis with the observable situation on building sites today. Craftsmen cannot be seen as a homogeneous social group: the terminology used by them is not fixed and one can observe large regional disparities (very local terms, no awareness of the terms of the villages nearby, no knowledge of spelling etc.). It is hard to imagine that Li Jie did not try to impose some order on the unsystematized nomenclature of his day.

To conclude, it seems to me questionable to assert that (p. 204) “Song accounts indeed suggest a general advancement in the social status of craftsmen during the Song dynasty” based only on some extracts from the
writings of Shen Gua, Guo Ruoxi or Ouyang Xiu on “remarkable craftsman biography.” These texts deserve to be placed in a wider historical perspective in order to understand more precisely their role in the debate. Indeed, these texts have a long history, as Klaas Ruitenbeek recalled (pp. 23-24) in his well-known work Carpentry and Building in the Late Imperial China: A Study of the Fifteenth-Century Carpenter’s Manual Lu Ban jing, Leiden, E.J Brill, 1993: “[...] since the days of Mencius and Mozi the carpenter has personified the idea of qiao ‘technical skill.’ The word has a strong connotation of ‘artfulness’ and correspondingly, the carpenter may figure both as a diligent and honest craftsman and as an evil sorcerer whose way it is better to keep out of. [...] Lastly, the carpenter appears as the great organizer, the perfect metaphor of the ideal minister of the Son of Heaven.” Putting into perspective the figure of the craftsman and of the carpenter in particular, might have brought an additional level to Feng’s extremely rich analysis of the YZFS.