

“Quickening and Slowing: The Genius of Kris Yao’s Singular Modernism”

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Our bus exited the freeway onto a residential street that led, after a short distance, to the entrance of the Water-Moon Monastery (2012). Standing in front of an immense reflecting pool and framed by the roof, column, and wall lines of his own composition, architect Kris Yao, dressed entirely in black, greeted us and welcomed us onto the grounds of the recently completed Zen Buddhist retreat. A dozen or so of us had been traveling by bus for more than a week visiting buildings in Shanghai and in Taiwan, with the ultimate purpose of awarding the 8th Far Eastern Architectural Design Awards. This was among the last stops on our itinerary and I was grateful that the frenetic architecture pilgrimage was drawing to a close in this tranquil and masterfully composed complex of buildings laid out on the Guandu plain between the Keelung River and the Datun Mountains.

Upon entering the monastery grounds, we passed through a series of sound-squelching concrete walls before proceeding into the capacious Main Hall where sunlight, air, and even the muffled freeway noise is filtered, tempered and made part of Yao’s composition. Though a monastery, Water-Moon is not a sanctuary from the world but is rather a sieve through which the external world of the city—its smells, sounds, tastes and touches—passes before entering the internal world of the mind and of contemplation. The hall, in fact, is both a central circulation junction where visitors cross paths with worshipers and nuns, and a wondrous sensory mixing chamber where the controlled stream of noise and chaos from the city is reconditioned and made to blend with the sound of prayers, visitor’s chatter, and the soft shuffle of those moving about on concrete floors. A magnificent teak box hovers above the main hall, blocking the sun’s rays and framing views into and out of the open, transparent expanse. The western edge of the Main Hall’s second level is defined by a long, thickened wooden wall that projects sunlight through

apertures carved in the form of Chinese characters. These sun-projected “light characters,” which are part of the 260-word “Heart Sutra,” move imperceptibly along the surface of simple wooden and concrete walls and around unadorned concrete columns, seeming to slow the very passage of time itself.

Outside, and to the east of the Main Hall, a large courtyard is punctuated by a series of irregularly situated black boulders that recall another era, if not another age. One is left to wonder whether the architect placed these massive rocks in the courtyard, or whether the courtyard was designed around them to accommodate glacial, rather than human, placement. Are they ornamental architectural details or ancestral traces of a more fundamental, geological plane on which the architect laid out his plane of composition?¹ Pre-cast concrete panel screens perforated by apertures carved as Chinese characters identify the nun’s second story quarters and sit atop a concrete column corridor that frames the courtyard before wrapping around to define the Monastery’s eastern edge. One can only imagine a similar movement of Chinese characters across the interior walls of the nun’s quarters to that which occurs in the Main Hall. Only here the nuns are witness to, and intimate participants in, this slowing of time and recanting—with light—of the entire 5000-word “Diamond Sutra” each morning as they rise. When one experiences, as they surely do, this cinematic projection across the walls and columns of their living quarters, the registration of a slower, thickened time becomes ritual and defines a different rhythm of life.

Water-Moon Monastery is an uncompromisingly modern temple designed for a progressive and enlightened client: the Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Foundation. Following principles set out by DDMBF founder, Zen Master Sheng Yen, Yao designed a temple that is spare and stark, but one that is visually rich and luxurious to the touch; that is free of excess, ornament and color, but that inspires one to contemplate all that exceeds the human self. Yao transforms the Guandu plain into a plane of composition on which he skillfully arranges vertical and horizontal planar surfaces made of concrete, wood, earth and water, so as to filter and transform our experience of the contemporary world—a chaos that appears and disappears at such speed that we humans literally cannot fully apprehend it. Water-Moon Monastery slows this pace of appearance and disappearance in

order to create a state of contemplation that aspires to an absolute speed that only a pantheistic god of the kind Spinoza imagined, or an enlightened follower of Master Sheng Yen, could attain. Consistent with Zen Buddhist practice, Yao thus slows our normative perception to enable a non-normative perception that aspires to survey and comprehend at absolute speed, the very speed at which the entirety of the world itself appears and disappears.

Yao slows our perceptions but he also simultaneously registers, in his composition, the co-existence of many different temporalities—from his use of large black rocks in the plaza to index geological time, to the use of water-jet cut concrete panels to index the ways in which he uses contemporary digital fabrication to translate ancient scriptures into a text of light using only sunlight, wood and concrete surfaces. The many digital photographs sent via email to Yao by nuns and visitors alike, picturing reflections of the scriptures and of the Buddha on the rain-soaked stone pavement, in the reflecting pool, and in the sky, evidence the varying speeds of modernization all occurring simultaneously on the multiple planes of Yao's remarkable composition. Water-Moon is a working monastery, but it has also become a site much visited by tourists and others seeking tranquility and temporary respite from the noise and chaos of the city. Indeed, what is perhaps most impressive is that Yao has so skillfully managed to co-mingle, yet keep distinct, these very different worlds—the world of the city and the world of the temple—to the great mutual benefit of both. And in so doing he has created an entirely new temple typology, one that is neither cluttered with the commercial and personal bric-a-brac found and often left behind in other temples, nor contrived, precious or artisanal, as might easily have been the case in the hands of a lesser architect.

Water-Moon Monastery is a masterpiece, but it is also emblematic of Yao's distinctive approach to Modernism. If Modernism is one form of architectural response to modernization—post-modernism, critical regionalism, high-tech and parametricism, are others— then Yao's work not only exemplifies a Modernism different from that which has arrived in Taiwan and Asia from the West, but it also demands a more complex definition and understanding of modernization itself. Rem Koolhaas, Yao's collaborator on the Taipei Performing Arts Center (2015), has suggested in his 2014 Venice Biennale

catalogue that modernization began to accelerate in 1914 with the onset of the first world war, transforming national identity, and thus national architecture identity, into a universal Modernism that today, more than 100 years later, can be seen in cities around the world. Cities, Koolhaas suggests, and the buildings that define them, which in 1914 looked very different from one another, today look very much alike. Koolhaas's assumption is that modernization begins in the West and quickly colonizes the rest of the world, leaving only "non-architectural" building practices and customs as traces of national architectural identity. Modernization thus creates, as its byproduct, a universal Modernism, a stylistic paste made from the pulverized remnants of national architecture identity, which is spread evenly around the world by large corporate architecture firms, pushed even into the most underdeveloped economic crevices, cracks and deformations, to create a uniformly smooth surface. Evidence of this spread has given adherents and antagonists alike, reason to believe that globalization is the completion of a linear process that began in the West and that has smoothed over and re-made the rest of the world in its image and likeness.

What globalization has instead revealed is that modernization is not homogeneous and it is not linear. Modernization does not begin in the West and spread around the world, transforming difference into sameness. Rather, global modernization is heterogeneous and non-linear and is defined neither by space nor by time, but instead by speed. Any survey of any global city will reveal a fractal urban fabric of pockets, bands and swirls, all modernizing unevenly. Kris Yao works in the seams of these pockets, bands and swirls, slowing and quickening the pace of modernization in order to respond to the constraints and opportunities presented by the project. There is perhaps no better example of this than the Lanyang Museum (2010) in Yilan, on the northeastern coast of Taiwan. In a formerly active port area in Black Stone (Wushih) harbor, which has been reclaimed as wetlands, Yao designed what is now one of the most commercially successful museums in Taiwan. Lanyang Museum is designed in the sharp, angular vocabulary of local cuesta rocks that were formed over millennia by oceanic erosion. In fact, it is hard to distinguish the museum from the cluster of cuesta rocks out of which it emerges, situated today, as they have been for millennia. Articulated as alternating layers of glass for public areas and cast aluminum and granite panels for museum gallery spaces, Lanyang Museum is

not so much a sieve that filters out the world as it is an enormous framing device through which visitors view the surrounding mountains, plains and ocean, whether outwardly through the glass frames or inwardly as framed exhibition galleries. Here, as in the Water-Moon Monastery, Yao creates a place of respite and contemplation. But the ambitions of the museum, which are to educate and entertain, are not the same as those of the temple, which is to enlighten. At Lanyang Museum, which was founded to showcase the natural beauty and cultural riches of Yilan County, Yao introduces us to a marbled temporality that appears to us all at once: looking out from the glass frame of the museum across the harbor and towards Turtle Island, the distinction of “before” and “after” the founding of the commercial harbor in the Qing Dynasty, “before” and “after” human settlement of this part of Taiwan, disappear in the mist and we are left to ponder a world where all of time and all of culture become part of the same temporality. Here, natural and man-made formations, geological and archaeological time, and aboriginal, Chinese, Dutch, Spanish and Japanese culture are larded together in order to provide the fullest and most robust experience of Yilan County.

In his 2002 Exhibition at the 8th International Venice Architecture Biennale, Kris Yao staged a simulacrum of his then uncompleted High Speed Rail Hsinchu Station, hung with photographs of two passengers who view one another across the platform, making momentary, though meaningful, connection, before boarding trains traveling in opposite directions. In this project and in other recent museum and cultural buildings, Yao is concerned not only with the materiality of architecture, with how they filter or frame the outside world, but also with our emotional experience of these spaces and places, with the ways in which we encounter and relate to each other as we transition through the multiple and complex temporalities of global modernization: from the corporate boardroom to the archaeological site; from the museum to the high speed train station; and from the freeway to the monastery, and back again to the freeway. Having spent several hours in the summer of 2014 at the Water-Moon Monastery, I, along with the other jurors from the 8th Far Eastern Architectural Design Awards, departed in a more relaxed state than when we arrived. As the bus drove off towards the freeway, I caught a final glimpse of the monastery reflected, on the pond, in near perfect symmetry. And though I could not claim to have seen the temple reflection with the perfect clarity that the Zen masters are said to

be able to achieve, I had seen enough to make up my mind about which project would receive the only vote I would cast for first prize.

¹See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London, 2010). In Chapter 1, Meillassoux describes pre-human reality as “ancestral.”