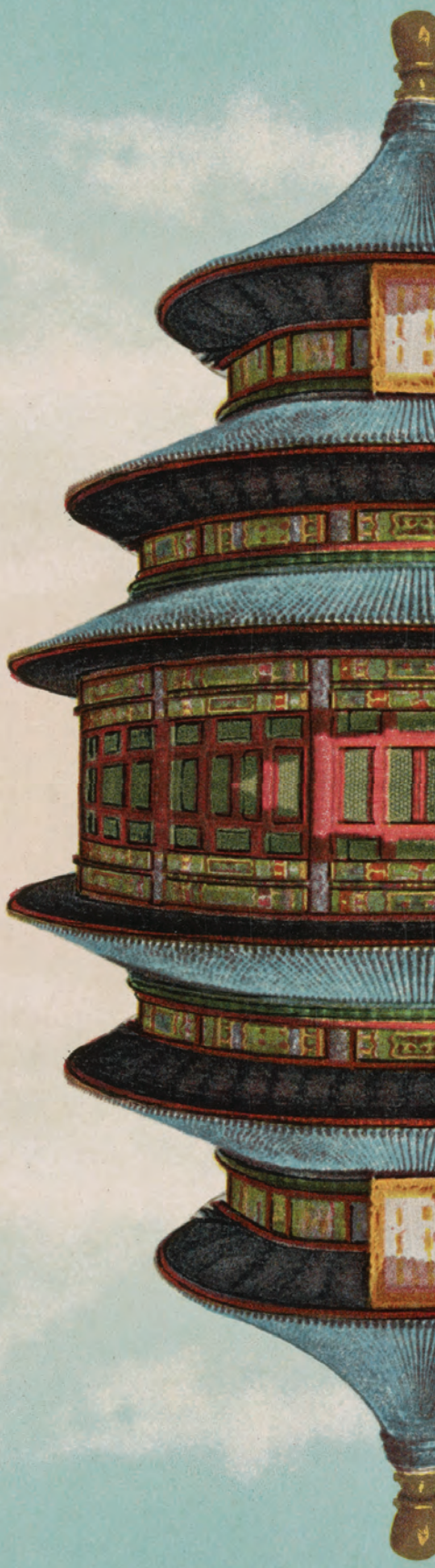
The Story of Liang and Lin



Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin came to Penn at the height of Philadelphia's Beaux-Arts building boom. They returned to revolutionary China with ideas that made a lasting mark on the development of architecture in the People's Republic.

By Naomi Elegant

In 1947, when he was a visiting fellow at Yale University and China's representative on the international team designing the United Nations Headquarters in New York, Liang Sicheng Ar'27 GAr'27 took a short trip to Philadelphia to visit his alma mater.

He stayed at the Camac Street residence of Alfred Bendiner Ar'22 GAr'27, an architecture classmate from Penn whose wife Elizabeth was close friends with Liang's wife and longtime collaborator, Lin Huiyin FA'27.

Bendiner asked Liang if he wanted to give a talk at the Architects Alumni Association dinner they were attending, which had been arranged to accommodate Liang's busy schedule. "You can see what a hot shot you have gotten to be," Bendiner teased his old classmate in a letter. Liang politely declined the speaking invitation, explaining in a handwritten reply that "it would be best for me to join my old friends, have lots of fun, and no talk."

Liang stayed overnight and left Philadelphia the next evening, after spending the day "in the Museum," likely the Penn Museum. Bendiner had been trying to get the University to award Liang an honorary degree, but missed the deadline and had been advised to re-apply the following year, provided Liang was still in the United States. By that time, though, he had returned to China for good.

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Lin and Liang at the Temple of Heaven.

Below: Rodin Museum (Philadelphia) and Hall of Supreme Harmony (Beijing) share design characteristics.

Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin were part of a group of Chinese students who came to the US on Boxer Indemnity scholarships in the 1920s and then returned to China, becoming known as the First Generation in Chinese architecture.

"Every architect in China traces his or her lineage from this group," says Nancy Steinhardt, professor of East Asian art and curator of Chinese art at the Penn Museum. "They took the Penn education, they went back to China, and they wanted to make a difference in the future of their nation."

When Liang and Lin arrived at Penn in September 1924, Philadelphia was the third-largest city in the country. It was a vital sea port and industrial powerhouse. Architecturally, it was emerging from the City Beautiful Movement and into the golden age of the pre-Crash 1920s.

Everywhere, buildings were cropping up that reflected the city's vibrancy and growth: in 1927, the Parkway Central Library opened its doors; in 1928, the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and in 1929, the Rodin Museum, designed by the French Beaux-Arts master Paul Philippe Cret, who taught and influenced Liang Sicheng, Lin Huiyin, and other members of the First Generation, as well as Louis Kahn Ar'24 Hon'71, who graduated from Penn the year Liang and Lin matriculated.

Cret came to Penn in 1903, recruited by Fine Arts dean Warren Powers Laird to lead the architectural program, and stayed on the faculty until he retired in 1937. By the 1920s, when Liang, Lin, and many other Boxer scholars were on campus, the program had flowered into one of the best in the country, specializing in the Beaux-Arts style Cret had imported from Paris. In 1926 the School of Fine Arts announced that Penn students had won more architecture competitions in the previous four years than students from all other schools combined; half of the winners were Chinese students.

The overlap between Cret and the students who became part of the First Generation was serendipitous. There is a certain visual compatibility between the Beaux-Arts style and traditional Chinese architecture, Steinhardt explains. In both disciplines, "There's a grand formalism, there's symmetry, there's the use of gates, and there's also a link with antiquity."

Just place a photograph of the Forbidden City's Hall of Supreme Harmony in Beijing next to a photograph of a Beaux-Arts building, Steinhardt suggests, and in both "there is this grandeur, symmetry, clear central axis, and emphasis on the sides and the top."

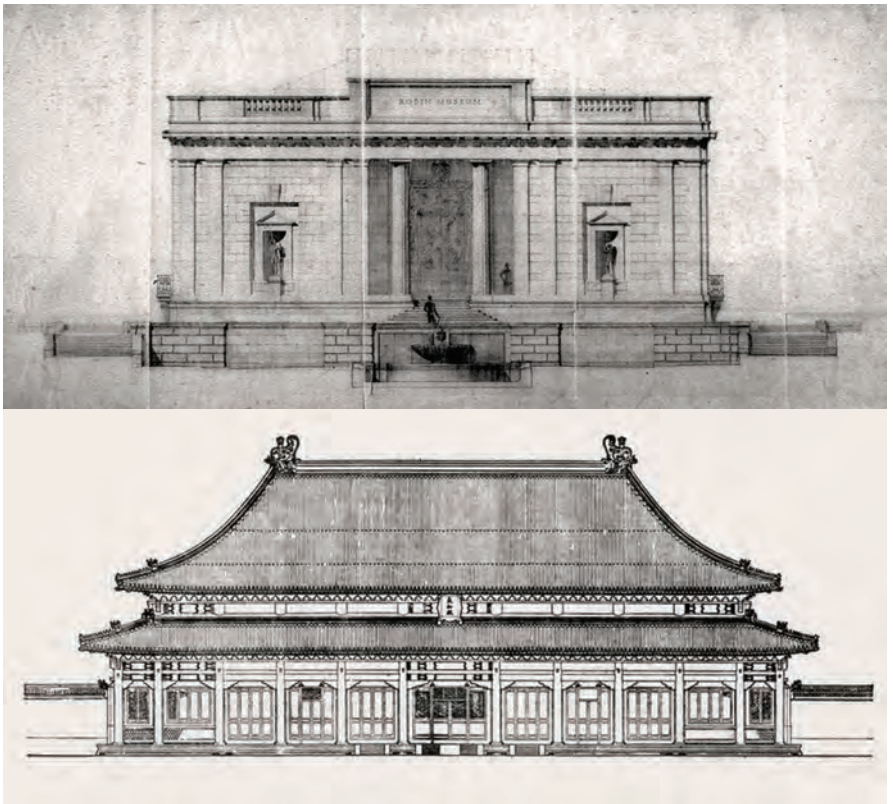
Penn showed Liang and Lin "a gentler way to modernize."

Liang's Beaux-Arts education lent itself to his preservation efforts back in China, offering "a gentler way to modernize."

It was not just the sublime that he picked up through his architectural education at Penn, but the mundane, too. He took classes in heating and plumbing, which traditional Chinese buildings—like those in the Forbidden City, constructed from impermanent materials like wood—had never incorporated.

"Liang's personal mission was for China to be able to modernize without losing Old China," Steinhardt says. "So what he was trying to do is use modern materials, but always make China look like China. He really worked hard not to lose the past."

Philadelphia is dotted with Paul Cret's influence ["Arts," Sep|Oct 2018]. In addition to the Rodin Museum, he drafted the first plans for the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, based on the Champs-Élysées in Paris, and he designed the original Barnes Foundation building in Merion, all in the Beaux-Arts style. Stein-



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hardt says that there is no evidence that Liang and the other First Generation architects came to Penn specifically to study under Cret. "It's kind of just really good fortune that this was the person Liang worked with."

Though Liang and Lin both came to Penn to study architecture, only Liang graduated with degrees in it (earning both a master's and a bachelor's in architecture in three years). The architecture program did not admit women—it only changed that policy in the mid-1930s—so Lin graduated with a bachelor of fine arts degree. At the time, only 10 percent of students in the School of Fine Arts—which encompassed the architecture, music, and fine arts programs—were women, and the majority studied music.

According to Wilma Fairbank, Lin's close friend and author of a seminal biography of the couple, women couldn't enter the program because "architectural students had to work on their drafting at all hours of the night, and the unchaperoned presence of women would be improper."

Lin had not acquiesced without a fight: when she was still in Beijing, she and her father wrote letters to Laird, asking if she could circumvent the policy, even enlisting the Chinese Legation Minister—equivalent to the national ambassador—to speak to the dean on her behalf. Laird was unrelenting, advising Lin to apply to other schools or to consider working toward a fine arts degree and supplementing it with architecture electives.

Lin opted to enroll at Penn despite those limitations, but her academic record shows that architecture was always front and center. She worked in Cret's office, took graduate-level design courses and some courses that ordinarily excluded women (carpentry, plumbing, and drainage), and from 1926 to 1927 even served as a part-time architecture instructor. With the help of a summer session, she still managed to graduate a year early.

Laird, who had been so resistant to admitting Lin to the architecture program, later wrote, "Miss Lin has pursued her course of study with great earnestness and a high degree of success. The amount of study which she has taken each year has been greater than that of the average student … In point of character, breeding, mentality and natural talent Miss Lin has shown the highest qualities."

Classmates recall Lin Huiyin, who went by Phyllis in English-speaking circles, as vivacious and social. Her friend and fellow student Elizabeth Sutro FA'27, who later married Bendiner, told Penn archivist Francis Dallett in 1979 that Lin was "an exquisite, lovely girl" with a "wonderful sense of humor." The author of a 1925 article in the *The Philadelphia Public Ledger* seemed as spellbound by Lin as everyone else who met her, writing of her "soft laughter" and "sharp, black eyes twinkling with amusement."

In Chinese popular culture today, the couple has been elevated to near-mythical romantic status. They have been the subject of multi–part documentaries, television soap operas, and even an actual opera—the China National Opera and Drama Theatre's *Lin Huiyin*, which premiered in May 2017 in Beijing.

Lin's personal life especially has been the subject of public sensation. Before heading to Penn and marrying Liang, she became acquainted with the Chinese poet Xu Zhimo while studying in England. Xu fell in love with the young Lin and divorced his first wife, Zhang Youyi, whose great niece went on to write a book about Zhang's life and that tumultuous love triangle.

In addition to architecture, Lin was also a published writer of poems and prose. She traveled Europe with her father, the politician and diplomat Lin Changmin. When Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore visited China, it was Lin's family who hosted the giant of Bengali literature, and Lin and Xu who interpreted for him.

Lin's ability to travel and her access to education was an anomaly for women at that time. She enjoyed these privileges thanks to a wealthy family and supportive father, explains Siyen Fei, associate professor of Chinese history at Penn. "Not everybody enjoyed that level of freedom. Social class was a big factor."

Still, Lin's lifetime of accomplishments was exceptional. "She really became, I think, a role model in China for women," Fei says. "She was very active, she's beautiful, talented, and she still asserted that kind of independence—she had a career [and] a husband who really respected what she did."

As widespread as Lin's influence may have been, her legacy is most tangible on a much smaller scale—within her family. Her niece is the American architect Maya Lin, whose illustrious career was kickstarted in 1981 when, at 21 and still an undergraduate at Yale, she won a nationwide competition to design the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC.

"My whole life was framed by my father's respect for Lin Huiyin," Maya Lin said to *Smithsonian* magazine in 2017. "You could say that Lin's passion for art and architecture flows through me[.] Now I'm doing what she wanted to do."

Liang and Lin, not yet married, lived separately while at Penn. When he first arrived, Liang lived on 40th Street, in a Victorian a few houses down from what is now Copabanana, where today's Penn students congregate for happy hour margaritas. Lin boarded in a Spruce Street dwelling that now houses the independent bookstore House Of Our Own.

Liang later moved to Pine Street, and then into a building on 38th Street which no longer exists; Lin moved to another boarding house, on Woodland Avenue, a block east of what became her favorite place in Philadelphia.

"Woodland Cemetery is the spot I like best in this whole city of Philadelphia," Lin told *The Philadelphia Public Ledger*. "It's only the hustle, bustle and noise that never ends that makes me so tired. I like

Below: Monument to the People's Heroes; Liang's drawing of an old Chinese structure.

quiet, I like to get alone sometimes … If I go to Fairmount Park, yes, I see trees and grass, but the crowds are always there. I guess I must sit among the tombs."

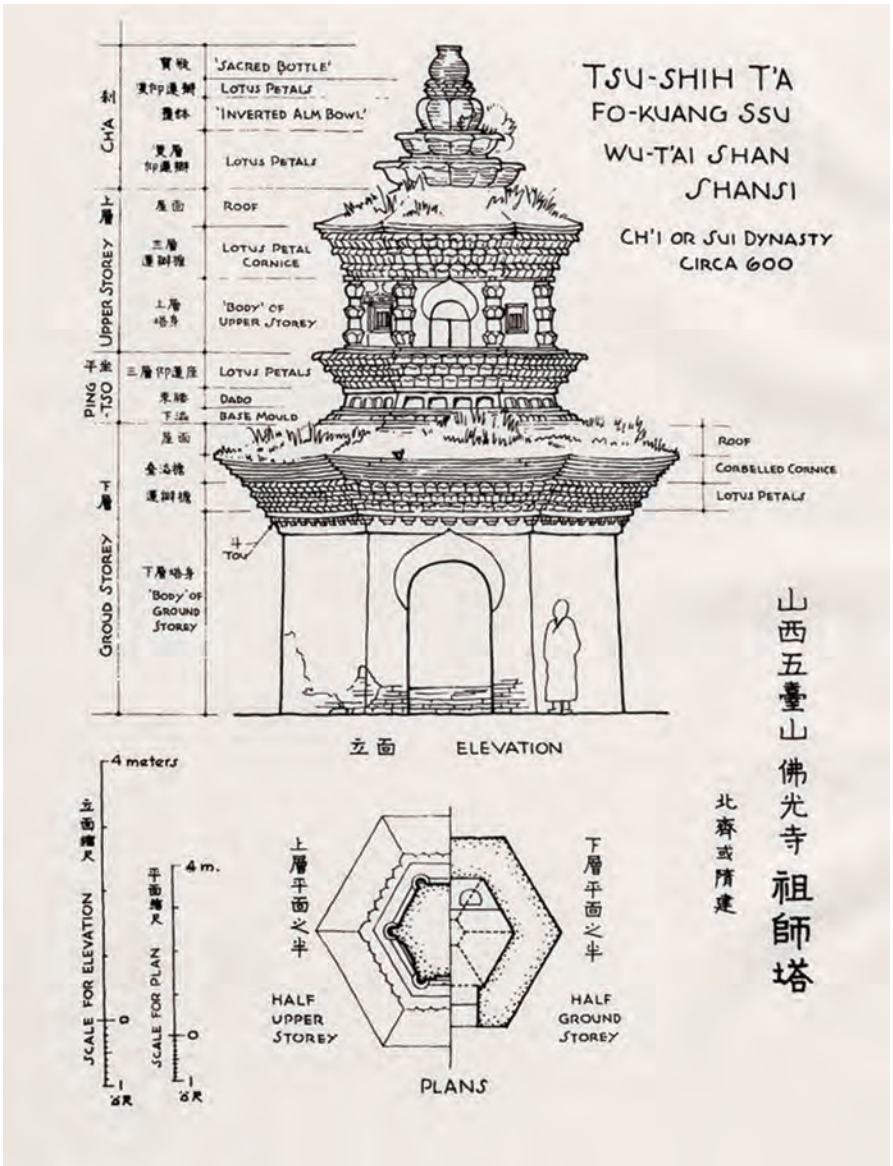
Her attraction to that bucolic burial ground, with its winding paths and immense trees, would later find an echo in her niece's experience of New Haven. Maya Lin, in a 1982 *Washington Post* article, described visits to the cemetery near Yale's campus as one of her favorite activities as an undergraduate architecture student there. "The Grove Street Cemetery is beautiful," she said at the time. "There's something peaceful about it. You feel removed. You feel you're in their world. You're in the world of the dead."

Though she stole away to the cemetery for peace and solitude, Lin Huiyin was remarkably active in collegiate extracurricular life. She was a member of the Chinese Student Association, the May Day Lighting Committee, and the Social Committee of the Philadelphia Chinese Students' Club. In 1926 she won a Christmas card design competition, and in 1927 she invited prominent Chinese intellectual Hu Shih to speak in Philadelphia.

For Liang, Lin, and the other First Generation architects, Penn was always a stepping stone to a greater, lifelong commitment. "They were the kind of people who did not plan to stay in the West at all. They really identified with China and they were here to learn things to bring back to China," Fei says. When they returned to China, the First Generation set up the first architecture schools and design firms in the country.

Nineteen-year-old Lin, speaking to the *Ledger* correspondent, explained how she intended to use her Western education: "We must learn the fundamental principles of all art only in order to apply them to designs distinctly ours. We want to study methods of construction that mean permanency."

Liang and Lin married in 1928 and spent the rest of their shared life collaborating on articles, teaching, traveling, and designing buildings together.



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They spent much of the 1930s traversing China's vast and remote countryside, seeking and surveying centuries-old wooden temples tucked into mountainside terraces, often braving mud, lice, and bandits to do so.

Their measurements, sketches, and photographs are in some cases the only such recordings of the beautiful and dilapidated structures they found, many of which were destroyed by Japanese bombings during World War II, or amidst the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. According to Dallett, the archivist, they sent two or three volumes of their drawings of temple woodwork back to Philadelphia as a gift for their mentor Paul Cret.

When the People's Liberation Army was on the brink of taking over Beijing during China's civil war, its leaders asked Liang and Lin to help mark out any buildings of cultural value, so that they knew what to protect if fighting extended into the city. After the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, Liang and Lin stayed in China to work with the new government and help shape the future of their country. Liang also hoped that a socialist government would bring urban planning and preservation under centralized control.

The couple designed the Monument to the People's Heroes, an obelisk that stands today in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, though Lin did not live to see it completed. She died of tuberculosis in 1955, three years before construction finished on the obelisk and a decade before the start of the Cultural Revolution, under which Liang was deemed a counterrevolutionary and sent to the countryside for re-education.

Liang's second wife, Lin Zhu, hid his notes and drawings to avoid the risk of confiscation; those papers later formed his posthumous magnum opus, *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture,* which contains some of the only recordings of the structures he and Lin painstakingly chronicled in the 1930s. Liang died in Beijing in 1972.

It's hard, in retrospect, not to look at their story and see a tragedy, a narrative of lost potential. In 1949, Liang drafted an urban development plan for Beijing, outlining a proposal to preserve and commemorate its magnificent castellated city walls, ancient gates, watchtowers and *hutong*—the architecture that had prompted American city planner Edmund Bacon (sometimes referred to as "The Father of Modern Philadelphia") to dub Beijing, in the 1930s, "possibly the greatest single work of man on the face of the earth."

Liang's plan envisioned a total transformation of Beijing that combined the preservation of the old with the construction of the new. "He came back literally to build a new China. That was his mission, that was his mandate," Steinhardt says. According to his plans, the old city was to become a public park, and adjacent satellite towns and industrial zones could be constructed in its outskirts. But Mao Zedong rejected Liang's proposal, famously pledging to remake the metropolis into "a forest of smokestacks."

"It's a really human story," Steinhardt says. "It's not that much of an exaggeration to say he gave his life to try to save the city of Beijing, and he wasn't successful."

But Liang's impact on modern Chinese architecture—in tandem with Lin, his lifelong collaborator until her death—remains unparalleled. While other First Generation members went on to become "pure architects," Steinhardt sees Liang's influence manifested in numerous roles: architect, educator, academic, historic preservationist, and pioneer in field work and restoration.

Even now, Steinhardt says, Penn's campus is a site of near pilgrimage. Chinese architects will come and ask to see where Liang took classes and sketched buildings, and students remain in awe of their predecessor. For "architecture students who come here," she says, "this is where *Liang* studied."

Liang and Lin were born to well-off families who represented the intellectual, cultural, and social elite of China. After 1949, when many of the same background chose to leave, Fei says, "They decided to stay because of their sense of mission to change things in China and to do something for Chinese people. So they also belong to these very progressive, left-wing, young scholars in China. There's still a lot to be said about that kind of idealism."

Every spring, Fei teaches a survey course on modern China for Penn undergraduates, the majority of whom have never heard of the famous couple. When she gets to the lectures on Liang and Lin, she says, "I can see students' eyes kind of light up. They really are excited to see this aspect of Penn."

For Chinese international students, the connection can be even more significant. "I think we sort of see the increasing presence of international students as a very recent phenomenon," Fei says. "For Chinese students, I think for a lot of them it's very meaningful when they [see] we actually have got this long connection between China and Penn."

When Alfred Bendiner was applying for an honorary degree from Penn on behalf of his friend Liang, he sent over a three-page copy of the architect's CV for Liang to check over before mailing it to the Penn administration. Liang returned the copy with his corrections in black ink: an honorary degree from Princeton in 1947, the Chinese titles of monographs from the 1930s, a couple of typos.

Under the heading "Creative Work in Architecture"—a listing of the buildings he'd designed—Liang had amended every entry, from "The Geology Building, National Peking University" to "a number of residences and shops, etc.," in his neat, cramped handwriting, so that they read:

& Phyllis Lin; (Lin Hui–yin)
in collaboration with Phyllis Lin
in collaboration with Phyllis Lin;
with Phyllis Lin
with Phyllis Lin.

Naomi Elegant C'19 lives in Hong Kong, where she is a reporter for *Fortune* Magazine.