A Turning Point in Chinese Brick History: From the Chinese Maritime Customs Archive to the British Construction Site

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The native “blue brick” had formed a solid characteristic feature in the old institution of Chinese architecture by the mid-nineteenth century. This got fundamentally changed in modern China. The exotic “red brick”, introduced by new architectures and construction methods, finally prevailed over “blue brick” in the production and the use of materials, with far-reaching influence on the whole construction history as we see today. The starting point of this epochal change remains an open question. The talk aims at addressing this issue. It depends on an investigation into the Chinese maritime customs archive and a rediscovery of the architecture in the central zone within the former British Settlement of Shanghai. As a result, the survey reveals some basic facts for the first time about Shanghai, and highlights the construction of the Holy Trinity Church there, 1866-69, designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott, RIBA and William Kidner, ARIBA.

Changxue Shu is an architecture-based researcher. She is undertaking a fellowship in the Needham Research Institute. Prior to this she attained a PhD in Conservation of Architectural Heritage in Polytechnic of Milan, prepared with an internship in the conservation laboratory there. Her research interest engages the multicultural interactions between materiality, practicality and representation in the making of architecture based on three dependent frameworks: history of science and technology, architectural heritage, and historical urban landscape. As an architect and urbanist she has indulged her love of architecture through travelling, surveying, designing and planning. Her present focus is changes in brickmaking technology in modern China, in collaboration with CNR-ICVBC of Florence.