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**A Discussion of the Writings on
Architectural History under
Cultural Essentialism**

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A Discussion of the Writings on Architectural History under Cultural Essentialism

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the limits of the writings on architectural history under the concept of cultural essentialism. The idea of cultural essentialism emerged from the moment of the European encountering and writing about the non-western other. In the discipline of architectural history in the nineteenth century, western architectural historians such as James Fergusson and Sir Banister Fletcher conceptualized and essentialized non-western architecture in their frameworks of the architectural history of the world. Their works further influenced oriental architectural historians such as Chuta Ito, and their self-formulations of their own architectural history. All their works present an ideal concept of architecture as materialized cultural representation, in other words, cultural essentialism.

However, if we are aware of this colonial context and take the postcolonial critique into account, the idea of architecture as materialized cultural representation becomes problematic. Edward Said revealed problematic synchronic essentialism in orientalism; Homi Bhabha's key ideas of hybridity and cultural difference rejected the precise and reduced categorization and discrimination created by western epistemology where cultural essentialism operates. Those postcolonial insights have pointed out the unbalanced relationships within cultural essentialism, and I believe that they also existed in the writings on architectural history both in the West and the East.

This paper, therefore, will examine both western writings of the other's architectural history, such as James Fergusson's and Sir Banister Fletcher's formulations of oriental architectural history, and the other's self-formulations of own architectural histories, for example Ito's self-announcement of own architectural history. Putting them together here makes it possible to show how the idea of cultural essentialism operates in the discipline. In the light of postcolonial criticism, and by exploring the limits of the idea of architecture as materialized cultural representation in architectural historiography, we may reconsider the way in which architectural historians formulated and conceptualized architectural history in the dynamic era of transculturation.

Keywords: Architectural History, Cultural Essentialism, Postcolonial Criticism

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Introduction

Writing architectural history in the West can be considered as a modern activity. It began in the eighteenth century, and at the very start tried to establish a comparative history of world architecture (Watkin, 1980). The architectural and art historians who followed have continuously formulated a comparative history on the one hand, and searched for the origin of the architecture of the nation on the other. Almost two centuries later, Japanese and Chinese architectural historians began their activities of writing the architectural history of their nations, and their purpose was to discover the origin of the architecture of the nation, and to respond to western biased descriptions of oriental architecture (Yen, 2012). Under this understanding, writing architectural history cannot be simply regarded as a purely scientific achievement.

If we look closely into the details of the process of the formation of architectural history in Japan or China, it is not surprising that the formation and formulations of oriental architectural history have actually been based on western methodology and eastern historiography. They are hybrid products. As a consequence, the writing of architectural history in and by the East is a complicated dialogue between the West and East, and in fact the West is both inside and outside the East. Debates on the origin of architecture have therefore contained both occidental orientalism and oriental self-identification. Being aware of this hybridity, it is important to put related western and eastern architectural historiographies together in order to discover western roles played within the activities.

By examining the process of writing architectural history by both the West and the East, we can further discover a hidden concept within the activities, and it is this which is cultural essentialism. Edward Said's postcolonial insight of 'synchronic essentialism' formulated how essentialism operated within the colonial context and within the occidental representation of the Orient. In 'synchronic essentialism', named 'vision' by Said, the Orient became an imagined geography within which there is a coherent core of the Orient without any historical and geographical difference, and therefore the Orient can be easily grasped by the Occident. Said's critical analysis of synchronic essentialism is an excellent illustration providing a way in which we can see how western scholars have analysed, realised and then formulated oriental architecture in a comparative history of world architecture. Meanwhile, by methodological and conceptual applications, eastern scholars were able to claim an equal position on their own. The methodological connections clearly imply that the essentialist concept actually derived from the western discipline of architecture. This is evidence that we should examine the special power/knowledge relationships within the methodological applications. Without noticing it, we can imitate and apply the same framework into our academic research.

As a consequence, this paper aims to discover and question how cultural essentialism works within the writing of architectural history, and its

problematic methodology. The paper also tries to put this issue within a broader colonial context and postcolonial analysis in order to analyse the specific methodological power/knowledge relationship between the West and the East. To do this, I want first to review the formation of Japanese and Chinese architectural history by Chuta Ito and, by tracing his background of architectural knowledge, to connect Ito with the western discipline of architecture. By doing so, the West and the East are not separate, but bound together. Second, I shall review useful postcolonial debates on cultural essentialism since Ito's formation of oriental architectural history is actually within the colonial context. Third, by examining the problematic concept of cultural essentialism in architectural historiography, we are able to open further discussions.

Ito's Writing of Architectural History as Self-Identification

Disciplinary writing of architectural history in Japan was initiated by the Japanese scholar Chuta Ito. He is regarded as the second generation of Japanese architects whose ambition was to discover what Japanese architecture is (Fujimori (藤森), 2008). He was the first Japanese scholar to initiate academic and scientific research on Japanese architectural history, and also Chinese architectural history. No architectural historians in Japan could ignore Ito's significant achievement.

Ito was born in 1867. He attended the *miyatsukoka* (the department of architecture) in Tokyo Imperial University in 1889, and later became interested in the history of art and architecture. When he attained *daigakuin*¹ in 1892, he proposed *Horyuji Kenchiku Ron* (On the Architecture of the *Horyuji*, 法隆寺建築論) as the subject of his PhD thesis. At that time, although it had not been recognized as the earliest wooden temple in Japan, the *Horyuji*'s unusual style still caught his eye. Ultimately, the *Horyuji* played a significant role in Ito's discovery of the essence of Japanese architecture, the formulations of the origin of Japanese architecture, and the constructions of Japanese architectural history.

The quintessence of Japanese architecture reached its peak in the Neiraku period. Architecture in the Neiraku period can be considered as of antique origin. And I believe that the Horyuji is the quintessence of this antique architecture. As a result, it is appropriate to say that the Horyuji is the origin of Japanese architecture. Besides, its scale and skills successfully gathered the complete quintessence of Oriental art. (Ito (伊東), 1893) (my translation)

¹*Daigakuin* is close to a PhD class.

Obviously, Ito's investigation of the *Horyuji* is an activity of searching for and understanding the national origin and artistic essence of Japanese architecture. In addition, the way in which Ito recognized the *Horyuji* as the quintessence of Japanese architecture was based on his investigation of the *Horyuji* being constructed in the most brilliant era – the *Neiraku* period. The *Horyuji* was eventually put into a broader field as a gathered quintessence of oriental art.

Another vital hypothesis in Ito's *Horyuji Kenchiku Ron* was his innovative theory of the transmission of architectural style. The idea first appeared in his thesis *Kenchiku Tetsugaku* (Architectural Philosophy, 建築哲学) (Ito (伊東), 1892), in *Kobu Daigakko* (The Imperial College of Engineering) in 1892. The whole idea of transmission was based on his concept of 'style'. For him, style is an artistic form and expression deriving from national taste. A nation and a region should have its own taste, which determines beauty. Architectural style is thus deeply connected with nation and with national taste. He believed that human beings disseminate architectural form when one migrates from one place to another. This is how the transmission of architectural style happens. During the time when there was a general belief that Japanese architecture derived from China, Ito set out to prove it, and spent three years, between 1902 and 1905, crossing the Eurasian continent in order to trace the origin of the *Horyuji*. During his investigative travels, he discovered the *Yungang* (雲岡) grottoes. The *yungang* grottoes were the smoking gun of Ito's transmission theory. There he discovered some decorations which are very similar to those in the *Horyuji*, and also an order which is similar to the Ionic order. This investigation proved Ito's hypothesis, and he then went on to construct his idea of oriental architectural systems.

Ito's investigation of Chinese architecture was another significant research approach in his academic career, and it clearly shows Ito's framework of Chinese architecture under essentialism. He published 'Shina Kenchiku (Chinese Architecture, 支那建築)' (Ito (伊東), 1908) in 1908, and *Shina Kenchiku Shi* (Chinese Architectural History, 支那建築史) (Ito (伊東), 1930) in 1926. These were the earliest academic article and monograph on Chinese architectural history written by an oriental scholar. In 'Shina Kenchiku', he divided Chinese architecture into two different groups, and he then modified these into three geographical groups in *Shina Kenchiku Shi*: northern, middle and southern Qing architecture. The differentiation was determined by environmental parameters such as natural materials and climatic conditions. Varying uses of materials and construction techniques led to different architectural expressions. About the northern Chinese architecture, he wrote:

The characteristics of the northern Chinese architecture reflect heaviness. This is because people and goods in northern China reflect heaviness. As I have seen, although they are all Chinese, northern Chinese people's bodies and faces reflect plumpness. They

move slowly. The characteristics of their architecture are very similar to this phenomenon. Palaces and temples have leisurely postures. Details reflect neither grotesqueness nor fineness. At first glance, there seems to be a lack of resplendence but without naivete. (Ito (伊東), 1994) (my translation)

About the middle Chinese architecture:

Architecture in middle China reflects a sense of lightness. In terms of the curvature of the roof, the architecture of northern China is flatter, and that of middle China is sharper. Their decorations are extremely complicated. (Ito (伊東), 1994) (my translation)

And about the southern Chinese architecture:

Because of the topography, the characteristics of the residents [of southern China], compared with the people in the middle China, are livelier and more active, but sometimes too drastic. Therefore, their architecture, like tropical architecture, is full of grotesque spirits. (Ito (伊東), 1994) (my translation)

Ito's comments make it clear that he considered architecture as a representation of a complete wholeness, a culture, including goods, architecture, people and even natural phenomena. He saw 'heaviness' as representing northern Chinese people and architecture; 'lightness' as describing the middle, and 'grotesque spirits' the south. Through the idea of culture, architecture is not merely an expression of materials, techniques and artistic sense, but more importantly a materialized cultural representation.

Methodology from the West

However, if we trace Ito's concepts, we can see the shadow of western architectural knowledge. Not surprisingly, it can be found initially in his definition of architecture. As early as Ito's thesis *Kenchiku Tetsugaku*, he stressed the relationships between architecture and aesthetics. He pointed out an aesthetics-oriented definition of architecture, which is artistic architecture.

The principle of aesthetic architecture is the quest for 'proportion' and 'harmony'. The insight of the truth of beauty emerges from lines and colour. What is generally known as natural 'unconsciousness' and 'spirit' is penetrated. Through the inorganic materials, an organic spirit can develop. (Ito (伊東), 1892) (my translation)

Ito's idea of artistic architecture came directly from western disciplinary knowledge and western architects' thoughts. As the bibliography shows, he

referred to the works of Viollet le duc, James Fergusson, Albert Rosengarten, Roger Smith, Sir William Chambers, Owen Jones, Wilhelm Lübke, John Ruskin and others (Ito (伊東), 1892). Fergusson's comparison between constructive and decorative ornament (Ito (伊東), 1892), Thomas Mitchell's idea of "strength, utility and beauty" (Ito (伊東), 1892), Viollet le duc's architectural principles - man's taste and habits, exigencies of climate, the nature of materials, and the means of execution (Ito (伊東), 1892) - helped Ito's constructions of the values of architecture as technical, aesthetic and poetic (Ito (伊東), 1892), within which 'architectural style' is the most significant manifestation of artistic architecture.

However, Ito's definition of architecture can be easily found in his connection with Fergusson's discrimination between architecture and building. In 1894, he published an article (Ito (伊東), 1894) in the leading Japanese journal *Kenchiku Zasshi (Journal of Architecture and Building Science)* to distinguish the difference between them in order to stress how important architecture is. This comparison can also be found in Fergusson's *History of Architecture*, which Ito referred to in *Kenchiku Tetsugaku* (Ito (伊東), 1892). By showing how building becomes architecture step by step, architecture for Fergusson "remain[s] a permanent object of admiration and of study for all future ages" (Fergusson, 1855); by contrast, building is the opposite.

Another vital knowledge of architecture is the vernacular-architecture-style of writings of architectural history. The influential architectural historian Sir Banister Fletcher played a significant role within this concept. Fletcher's famous *A History of Architecture Upon the Comparative Method* was published in 1896, and his notorious drawing of 'the tree of architecture' was included in the fourth edition published in 1901. In 'the tree of architecture', not only did Fletcher outline his map of world architectural history, but he also constructed six factors of which architecture consists. According to the drawing, the tree is irrigated by Geography, Geology, Climate, Religion, Society and History. The main trunk consists of Greek, Roman and Romanesque styles, and the tree-crown consists of Gothic, Renaissance, Revivalist and Modern styles. These all show the mainstream of western architectural history, the historical style. There are several smaller branches, such as Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Central American styles, labelled as being non-historical styles. The drawing had two different meanings for Ito. On the one hand, Fletcher's labelling of Japanese architecture as non-historical was unacceptable, and this eventually stimulated him to begin his own investigations of oriental architectural systems; on the other hand, the way in which Fletcher formulated the others' architecture in the *History of Architecture* became a imitable means of expression for representing architectural history in Japan, especially the six leading influences. Those geographical, geological, climatic, religious, social and historical differences between the West and the East allowed oriental scholars such as Ito to claim specific characteristics of the architecture of their own region, culture, race and even nation. As a consequence, writings on architectural history were bound

with those factors, in other words - they were vernacularized. Architecture then represents peoples' social groups and religious systems, and also reflects environmental and material conditions. Under this consideration, architecture becomes materialized cultural representation.

From the Viewpoint of Postcolonial Criticism

Apart from historical data, let us enter theoretical reviews, the first of which is the critique of cultural essentialism in the light of postcolonial criticism since the historical date located in the colonial/imperial field. The meaning of essentialism originally referred to a stable meaning for each word in a language. In the context of cultural studies, debates are usually surrounded by questions of cultural identity. In that context, cultural essentialism "refers to the argument that there are fixed truths to be found about identity categories so that there exists an essence of, for example, women, Australians, the working class and Asians" (Barker, 2004). In contrast to essentialism, anti-essentialists believe that the stable relationships between meaning and word in language are a kind of discursive formation. The 'fixed truth' and fixed categories are always changing according to time, position and usage.

The critique of cultural essentialism can also be found in Stuart Hall's discussions on cultural identity. Hall viewed culture as "the position of *enunciation*". Cultural enunciation is a statement through the activity of exclusion and inclusion to distinguish between 'self' and 'other'. Also, the activity "is always 'in context', *positioned*", "from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific" (Hall, 1990).

If we put the critiques of essentialism in the context of colonialism/imperialism, we can discover how the postcolonial critic Edward Said regarded the term 'synchronic essentialism' to formulate the way in which the West produced representations of the Orient in the colonial context.

[T]his static system of "synchronic essentialism" I have called vision because it presumes that the whole orient can be seen panoptically. (Said, 2003)

The Orientalist surveys the Orient from above, with the aim of getting hold of the whole sprawling panorama before him – culture, religion, mind, history, society. To do this he must see every detail through the device of a set of reductive categories (the Semites, the Muslim mind, the Orient, and so forth). (Said, 2003)

What Said wanted to stress was the critique of a simplified and reduced concept of synchronic essentialism, vision. Within the occidental vision, the Orient, without historical progress and geographical differences, is unchanged and fixed into a set of traits that can be easily read, studied, understood and even written. The Orient has been and continuously is regarded as an inferior

and irrational other opposite to the rational and mature Occident. It is a negative representation of the other/the Orient by the Occident under cultural essentialism, an over-simplified other, and a categorized framework.

However, one theoretical critique of Said's orientalism paid attention to his dichotomy between the Occident and the Orient. Homi Bhabha, by contrast, proposed his theoretical concept of hybridity and cultural difference to criticize the precise categorization and discrimination between self and the other, and civilization and primitive. The importance of hybridity for Bhabha was the critique of two prior facts behind the colonial discourse: 1) the discrimination based on the western traditional concept of dichotomy:

But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the "third space" which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (Bhabha, 1990)

and 2) the idea that the 'part' represents the 'whole':

What radically differentiates the exercise of colonial power is the unsuitability of the enlightenment assumption of collectivity and the eye that beholds it. For Jeremy Bentham (as Michel Perrot points out), the small group is representative of the whole society - the part is already the whole. Colonial authority requires modes of discrimination (cultural, racial, administrative ...) that disallow a stable unitary assumption of collectivity. The 'part' (which must be the colonialist foreign body) must be representative of the 'whole' (conquered country), but the right of representation is based on its radical difference. (Bhabha, 1990)

Furthermore, the critique of cultural diversity also shows Bhabha's critique of cultural essentialism even though originally he wanted to challenge western frameworks of the world. For him, cultural diversity was "a norm given by the host society or dominant culture" (Bhabha, 1990) by locating them within the western own grid. Cultural diversity also encourages racism under universalism masking "ethnocentric norms, values and interests" (Bhabha, 1990). However, the question is: can various cultures in the world be fixed into particular categories by particular values? And who makes the values? what are they? As a consequence, Bhabha proposed cultural difference rather than cultural diversity.

Cultural diversity is an epistemological object – culture as an object of empirical knowledge – whereas cultural difference is the process of the enunciation of culture as 'knowledgeable', authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification. If

cultural diversity is a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics or ethnology, cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity. (Bhabha, 2004)

Said concentrated on the Occident/the colonizer's representation of the Orient/the colonized through synchronic essentialism, a fixed and reductive category. Bhabha, by contrast, paid attention to how the Orient/the colonized faces the western imperial/colonial essentialized categorization. From Bhabha's theoretical formulations of hybridity and cultural difference, the colonized was able to divert attention to the idea of 'cultural enunciation', a process of signification. In other words, how do we differentiate self and other?

If Fergusson's and Fletcher's descriptions of non-western architecture in their architectural histories can be regarded as the result of western architectural knowledge under imperialism and colonialism, the way in which they applied them is close to Said's concept of synchronic essentialism. Then it also becomes clear that Ito's construction of Japanese and Chinese architectural history is also based on the same idea. But this time not only is the fixed and unchanging categorization and essentialization put on the other (Chinese architecture), but it is also put on the self (Japanese architecture). However, what will the problem then be?

The Inquiry into Writings of Architectural History

The main point is that the concept of cultural essentialism still exists in the writings of architectural history, and to reconsider the issue we have to consider two questions: how and where did cultural essentialism emerge within architectural history? To answer these questions, we have to return to Ito's definition of architecture as artistic architecture, within which architecture has been bound with the essentialized concept of culture. The concept of 'artistic' was based on style, and style depended on 'people's or national taste'. Hence architectural style represents national characteristics. Fletcher's six fundamental factors of architecture also showed another way in which architecture was considered as a fixed and stable representation. Fletcher's six leading factors can be divided into two groups, environmental parameters (geography, geology and climate) and culture (religion, society and history). The specific environmental and historical conditions of each group of people were understood as fixed and stable characteristics, the essence. When architecture is composed by these factors and formulated in such a way, we are able to understand and even grasp the whole image of the architecture of the race, the group and the nation. Thus architecture is essentialized and culture is materialized. Through the same process, the essentialized architecture of a nation was able to be labelled using Fergusson's, Fletcher's and Ito's identity categories of world architectural history.

But where did the concept emerge? It is not surprising that those considerations emerge within the context of one culture encountering another. It emerges when 'we' ask ourselves: what is our (national or racial) architecture? what kind of architectural style can represent our race, group or nation? It also emerges when we try to recognize other peoples' architectures: what is 'their' architecture? what architectural characteristics represent 'their' culture? Stuart Hall viewed the cultural statement as an activity of exclusion and inclusion by distinguishing self/the other and we/they.

In addition, what is the problem of cultural essentialism within the activity of writing architectural history? Bhabha's idea was that the part represents the whole, and we can easily consider how a 'selected' part represents the 'imagined' whole. The most important thing is actually the 'unselected' part, the part which does not belong to the essence. Obviously the whole process includes making a decision. It is necessary to decide what is the essence of architecture, and which architecture represents the essence. However, those which cannot represent the essence disappear or become exceptional cases. But the way in which this can be relied on is still unclear or is still based on western values, western vision. Furthermore, following western knowledge – the western eye – the Occident retains the dominant position, and the Orient only fills in the occidental category. Or the Orient creates its own other, its own categories.

Further Possibilities

Without examining the dissemination of methodology, oriental constructions of architectural history on their own are still problematic. Through the dissemination of methodology, such as the idea of style, the discrimination of architecture and building, oriental scholars have learned how to see their architecture through western eyes or their own hybridized eyes, by using scientific and disciplinary western methods. However, these methods also indicate western values. In other words, oriental architecture and architectural history are actually activated and valued by western knowledge. Within such a construction, the Occident occupies a superior and dominant position; by contrast, the Orient stands in an inferior position.

Therefore I believe that it is crucial to explore how and where cultural essentialism exists within the writings of architectural history in the East because it is a complicated process and itself is problematic. Without examining those inquiries, we cannot discover the hidden power-knowledge relationship which exists in the formation and formulations of oriental architectural history. And architectural history is no longer simply a pure and scientific disciplinary knowledge, but both itself and its methodology are problematic, and need to be questioned. As a consequence, examining cultural essentialism within the formation and formulations of oriental architectural historiography shows us the importance of questioning the authority and authenticity of the disciplinary knowledge, and could open more space for us for further discussions.

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