

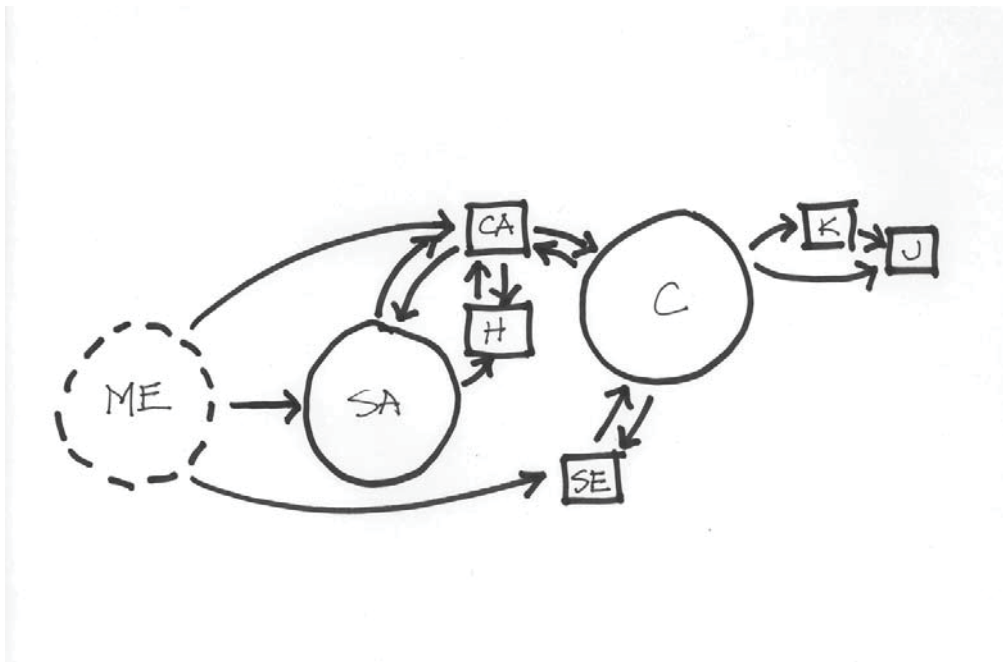
The Boundaries of a Trans-national Survey of Asian Architectural and Urban History

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Abstract

In constructing a survey of the architectural and urban history of traditional Asia, how would one define the edges of the region under study? This paper will argue that such a study can reasonably exclude Western Asia (also referred to as the Middle East, or the Ancient Orient), modern Siberia, much of the Indonesian Archipelago, the Philippines, Australia, and most of the Pacific Islands for various reasons, including geographic isolation, climate, and more reasonable inclusion in another architectural historical cluster. This is in part due to the definition of the core of such a study, and to the nature of the various edges.

Paper



A Model for the study of Asian architectural history. [Key: C – China, CA – Central Asia, H – Himalayan Plateau, J – Japan, K – Korea, SA – South Asia, SE – Southeast Asia, ME – West Asia]

One of the first tasks required in studying Asian architectural and environmental history is to decide what the scope of the topic should be. In a former paper given at an earlier HICAH conference (Yip, 2006) I tried to define the scope of such a study by developing a bipolar model of the subject with South Asia and China as the two great traditions around which Asian architectural and environmental history revolved, and suggesting that other regions could be viewed as dependent cultural developments responding to the influences being radiated out from the two core areas. [See the diagram above.] In this model Central Asia, the Himalayan plateau, and Southeast Asia were both zones of transmission between the two great core areas. By contrast Korean peninsula and Japan were primarily influenced by China to the extent that even South Asian influences came to them mediated by Chinese interpretation and translation.

South Asia after the Aryan invasions became the hearth for the emergence of three Great Religions [Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism] around which monumental architecture arose in more permanent materials that suggested a striving for the eternal, and the embodiment of ritual. For the Buddhists this started as the transformation of the Neolithic burial mound into the monumental stupas constructed during the reign of the Mauryan King Ashoka. This began an architectural tradition that spread across Asia (and later the world) and remains vital to this day. Later Hinduism began stone ritual constructions establishing a tradition that was to spread across South Asia, and also continues into the present. The other great core region became what we refer to as China [Holcombe] which emerged as a Confucian/Taoist culture. Over the centuries the other cultures/countries of Asia were transformed by their interaction with one or both of these cores. Cultural influences radiating from and to the two great core regions was not continuous but more episodic and of greater or less influence depending upon conditions at the time of contact, interaction, and cultural exchange.

In this model of Asian architectural inter-connections, Central Asia and Himalayan plateau were paths of transmission connecting South Asia and China. The most famous route consisted of the trails that came to be known as the Silk Road connecting China with South Asia and the Mediterranean world. It was actually a series of routes, which ran from Xian in the East through the Gansu corridor to the Turfan Depression on its way westward. The routes bifurcated going north and south to skirt the deadly Takla Makan Desert, and rejoined at the eastern side of the desert. Some northern routes made their way across Afghanistan and onto Western Asia, while the southern route climbed the Pamirs into ancient Gandhara, the gateway to South Asia. The various communities along the various

routes contained a hodgepodge of ideas, languages and peoples as goods, people, and their belief systems passed back and forth along the Silk Road. (Foltz, 2000) These communities were fragile and could easily collapse due to changing climatic conditions, or changing political fortunes and war. Later a secondary route across Himalayan plateau developed. The hybrid cultures and architectural traditions of Central Asia and Himalayan plateau absorbed useful ideas that flowed through on their way east and west. (Drege & Buhner, 1989) Architectural ideas seem to have flowed most notably from the west into China, particularly with the movement of Buddhism into East Asia.

Korea and Japan were heavily influenced by China, as the Chinese form of writing, culture, the arts and architecture spread particularly during the Han and Tang Dynasties. Even Buddhism came in a form modified by its interpretation and restructuring in China.

By contrast Southeast Asia was impacted both by South Asia and China. It was heavily influenced by South Asian culture and religion as can be seen in the rise of a series of indianized states. (Coedes, 1968) The influence was so great, that the Ramayana became the central saga at the heart of both the Thai and Indonesian cultures, and it remained so in Indonesia even after the adoption of Islam. At the same time political and cultural influences traveled south from China shaping Vietnam and other parts of Southeast Asia as the sea connections between South Asia and China came to rival and later displace the Silk Road. (Foltz, 2000)

I would argue that this very general model of architectural influence flows and interconnections functioned until the modern era, which was marked by Western commercial expansion and Western imperialism.

Given this bipolar model of traditional Asian architectural history, what are its geographical boundaries, or edges?

To the east is the Pacific Ocean. For the most part the Pacific Ocean forms an edge. The exceptions being the close in islands that became Japan, and a part of the Indonesian archipelago. Being relatively close to the Asian mainland, migrations and cultural flows rather easily came down the Korean peninsula and crossed the straights to the Islands of Japan, more directly from the Shantung Peninsula.

The peoples of the Pacific are best considered a separate phenomena. Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia represent small

populations living on islands dispersed over a huge area. With the decline in the great migrations, many of the Islands became isolated entities. Lacking metal tools for the most part, without pottery, and with only a narrow range of domesticated animals needed both for food and labor power, most of the Pacific island peoples had highly restricted opportunities to develop complex architectural traditions, or adopt many influences from mainland Asia. (Diamond, 1997; Morgan, 1988; Sandler & Mehta, 1993) Also much of the settlement was rather recent in historical leaving them a rather short span of time to develop technologically once isolated from other more advanced regions of Asia. To the southeast the Maori settlement of New Zealand seems to have begun round 1300, after other possible earlier human contact with New Zealand by seafaring peoples.

The northern boundary for the study of Asian architectural history can be defined by the transition line between the more sedentary farming peoples of the south and the nomadic hunter-gatherers of the north. This dividing line is a gently curving line roughly corresponding to 45 degrees north latitude dividing the settled agrarian south and from the nomadic cultures to the north in the deserts, grasslands and the forests. This line would have moved north slowly due to the Holocene warming. (Fagan, 2004) This places northern Manchuria, Mongolia and Siberia north of the regions of agrarian settlement. There was no great building tradition with major permanent monuments created by the nomadic peoples of the north. Such construction did not fit into the lifestyle, migration, economy, and political instability they confronted.

To the south of Asia the Indian Ocean formed a natural edge. There are no major civilizations that did a significant amount of building on the islands of the Indian Ocean. Much of the Indonesian archipelago East of Bali did not engage in monumental construction and architectural building in more permanent materials. Its the population remained hunter-gatherers, and swidden farmers. Australia remained a continent populated by Stone Age hunter-gatherers.

The most serious boundary question is how to divide an Asian architectural history from an architectural history of the West. There is no clean division but one might split West Asia from South Asia and Central Asia and have a rough floating boundary separating contemporary Afghanistan and Pakistan from Iran. Why this division? West Asia with Mesopotamia along with Egypt represents the hearth area for the development of the cultures of the Mediterranean world and the West. Also, Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic World incorporated West Asia into the West, and the Roman Empire

controlled a significant portion of it as well. It also gave rise to the three religions of the Book, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These three religions are so central any understanding of the Mediterranean architecture and civilization. So, although there is every reason to believe that Mesopotamia influenced the development of the Indus Civilization and the rise of South Asia, West Asia was much more central to the development of the West and was integrated into the Mediterranean world and the West for much of its history.

West Asia stands as a hearth area for both the East and the West. To place Mesopotamia, Turkey and the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean within a history of Asian architecture and environmental development is to turn it into a more expansive Euro-Asian architectural history rather than a study focused on Asian region organized around two great cultural cores. In fact an Euro-Asian architectural history would be a project on a larger scale than most existing world architectural histories and would defeat the purpose of attempting to view the particularities of Asia separately. South Asia did develop an independent cluster of cultures and traditions with its own religious traditions. (Harle, 1994; Tadgell, 1990) They were certainly informed by influences from West Asia but developed independent traditions as shown by the rise of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. In a sense the hearth area of Mesopotamia sent routes out in two directions, which helped to shape two very different cultural complexes resulting in the building traditions, the West and South Asia.

Other periods also experienced influences traveling from West Asia to South and Central Asia. The Greek impact came with Alexander the Great and his expansion of empire into Afghanistan and the Indus River watershed. An even more dramatic impact came with the Moslem conquests of Central Asia and then conquests into the heartland of South Asia culminating in the rise of the Mughal Empire. These events though profound, found an already fully developed series of South Asian cultures with fully established architectural and urban building traditions. It is better to either view West Asia as either a separate entity in its own right, or as a part of the West with which it was continuously culturally integrated.

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