

## **Bracketing**

The Immediate Historicity of Asia

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### **Abstract**

*History is not only a representation of the past but also of the philosophy of presenting the past in a specific spatiotemporal context – historiography. Historiography hence is the methodology of telling stories of the past; and according to it, evidence of the past is only chosen for what it can tell the readers about events or individuals that the story teller wants to tell. More precisely, depending on the ‘author’s’ intention, ‘historicity’ as used by historical materialists is often discounted. Asia today is soaked in decolonisation processes, which underline the intertextuality between individual perception and collective reception, and top-down intervention and bottom-up participation. In architectural history, this intertextuality is also formed as architecture is involved in not only the humanities but also technology. That is, the understanding of architecture is about its historical phenomena in different empirical settings. This paper argues that historiography does not just show the flow of appearances presented to things but ‘of’ things in a sense that they intend the identity of objects; and, in Asian architecture, the intertextuality between diachronic and synchronic entities is significant. In other words, when Asian architecture is recognised, it shows the presence of being so, and this means the identity of Asian architecture is attributed to the individual who recognises it rather than its appearances. This experience of being in phenomenology is known as bracketing – to suspend the internationalities when they are being contemplated – which suggests a quotation of neutralisation. What is the immediate historicity of Asia registered in architecture? How does Asia, as a quoted subject, suggest a position in architectural history? This paper discusses these issues through an analysis of a variety of empirical Asian architectural phenomena from a standpoint of bracketing in terms of historiography and architectural history.*

## Introduction

In his known lectures entitled *The Ideas of Phenomenology* (1907), Edmund Husserl defined and elaborated the notion of *bracketing*. He wrote:

The phenomenon in this sense falls under the law to which we must subject ourselves in the critique of knowledge, the law of the *epoché* in relation to everything transcendent (e.g. ego and experience) ... If I place this ego and the world and the experience of the ego as such in question, then reflection upon what is given ... yields the phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

*Epoché* represents the methodology of *bracketing* that allows things to be observed without being looked through, and hence the appearances do not bias and block the analysis when they are being unfolded. In the philosophy of history, the intractable epistemological problem of the past that cannot be “faithfully” represented in the present without subjectivity should be suspended – i.e. its appearance must be acknowledged – before it becomes comprehensive. That is to say, from a phenomenological perspective, once this conundrum is ‘bracketed’, it can then only be observed and analysed from outside the brackets; and, therefore, history as well as its structure of the living present are able to be seen as two parts – its historicity (historical authenticity), which registers the use of historical materials, and subjectivity (authorship). This paper aims at examining architecture through the subtle interaction between historicity and subjectivity that is registered within.

One example of *bracketing* that has been practiced in the physical built world is the airport. The insides of airport buildings, for instance, in the Kuala Lumpur International Airport and in the Hong Kong International Airport, based on their instrumentality, can be considered being equally neutral; therefore, the passengers who are inside an airport can be treated as subjects facing a bracketed object. The landscapes seen from the insides of the airports are totally different, if we still take these two airports as the cases; however, this ostensible difference would not be so obvious if the *bracketing* treatment was not applied. More precisely, if the landscape is not seen from the neutralised airport insides, in which suggest the suspending of the landscape, e.g. imagining seeing the uniqueness of each city – the forest-like oil palm plantations in Kuala Lumpur on the side of the highway or the hyperdense apartment buildings in Hong Kong, their uniqueness would simply either die away or be assimilated into the indistinguishable. Architecturally, to what extent a stylistically and externally introduced building design weighs as a native built entity is a vivid indicator of contemporary Asian architecture’s position in a globalised context of historiography.

## The Past and History

Many Asians often blur the distinction between the concepts of *the past* and *history*, particularly if their first languages adopt the same term to depict them, e.g. in *Han*, dissimilar to English, the past and history are often both addressed as *li shih*, whereas they are in essence and in meaning not entirely interchangeable. The past alludes to the fact happened, and its present representation is usually formed in history. The fact that what happened already can never be presented again but represented; therefore, history is nothing faithful but only an interpreted form of registration. History hence is a form of reporting the past, rather than the past as it actually was, and history as the representation of the past, can be ‘re-represented’ in many forms. Nevertheless, the reality of understanding history is often more complicated than to treat it as a report; instead, it is usually regarded as a form of knowledge. According to historian Alun Munslow’s definition:

Historical knowledge, as it is usually described, is derived through a method – called a practice by those who believe in the possibility of an accurate understanding of the past – that flows from its techniques in dealing with the traces of the past.<sup>2</sup>

Put differently, the relationship between the past and history is just like the one between an original manuscript and its translated versions.<sup>3</sup> Any translated version is never just a copy of the original but

a unique piece of interpretation as it inevitably involves the cultural-political and geostrategic ideologies as well as personal understanding of the translator, which might differ from that which the author wanted to express and argue originally. The use of language, furthermore, is another critical drive that particularises history as Jacques Derrida has exemplified: a Franco-Maghrebian speaks of his “mother tongue,” which is French; it is certainly not “French,” but he speaks about it.<sup>4</sup> Of course, Derrida implies the *exténuation* phenomenon<sup>5</sup> in the policymaking under colonisation which often results as the example provided – one’s first language, which was taught to this person by a coloniser - is not the native language of this person; and the native language, due to the colonisation, has missed and cannot be traced immediately. This notion, however, is characteristic of the difference between the past and the present. Therefore, history does not merely represent the past; it also says something about the philosophy of identifying the past in a particular spatial and time-based context which is known as historiography.

For instance, in Malaysia, the National Museum is often underscored in studies of the nation’s architectural history as a modern built form that represents its national identity considering this modern built object which comprises identifiable features of Malay architectural tradition. This statement, on the one hand, stands for a perspective of being politically correct of the dominant Malay nationalism. On the other hand, it is problematic when this statement is under an examination of whether these features are representative enough of Malaysia’s multicultural and multiracial existence as the Malay-modern relation is never the only storyline that bridges the past of Malaysia to its present. That is to say, what the National Museum has bracketed is the historicity of Malaysia, its cultural politics, that moderates the historical trajectories in the presence. Similar to Franco-Maghrebians’ struggle of identifying their native language as a historiographical characteristic of their past in the present, the National Museum has inscribed the historiographical characteristics Malaysia’s past in the present form of its cultural politics – a colonised-postcolonial built text in a postcolonial context; the Malay cultural relics which have become independent of the British colonisation somehow convert themselves into a different position as an internal coloniser that occupies a dominant place in the present multicultural and multiracial hierarchy. What this kind of phenomenon that the past has been historiographically ‘bracketed’ in a particular context of the presence reflects is the historicity of Asia – this built reaction to Asian historicity is especially obvious in today’s Southeast Asia, in which the postcolonial presence has underscored different registration of and response to the once encountered postcoloniality. Ostensibly, the past is always negotiated when it is being represented as history, and ‘facts’ are never politically innocent in history because they are discounted to be correlated and placed within a particular context.<sup>6</sup> This process is the contextualisation in historiography, and it is also a colligation of the past that biases the historical authenticity with subjectivity.

### **Bracketed Subjectivity**

In an Asian context of architectural history, this paper argues that the involvement of subjectivity in historiography should not be considered as a pure form of authorship but also with a function. As a form of subjectification, historiography constitutes a unique collection of individualisation in history that Michel Foucault referred to as ‘author function’.<sup>7</sup> Foucault implied that today’s discourses have freed themselves from the subject of expression becoming a relationship of signs. He underscored a fact that the point of the production of discourses was not to promote the act nor a subject, but to try and create a space into which they constantly disappear. Therefore, the task of criticism is not to bring out this relationship with the author but to analyse the intrinsic form of it. It is particularly true when this notion is examined in an observation of the built environment in which too many aspects can only be studied without an identified ‘marker’ but the works themselves. When Foucault said: “we try, with great effort, to imagine the general condition of each, the condition of both the space in which it is dispersed and the time in which it unfolds”,<sup>8</sup> he echoed the schematisation that Asian historicity *brackets* Asian architectural phenomena before they are being examined.

An example can be seen through an examination of the pedestrian network in two different architectural contexts of Asian urbanism. In the first context, the pedestrian network in Malaysia is rather unique and isolated in terms of its often-violent installation into the public transportation system. In Malaysia today, modern infrastructure has been vastly and promptly constructed in the metropolitan areas (high-speed vehicle networks especially), and it hence has caused an asynchronous interplay between the urban fabric and local lives. In this asynchronous relationship, pedestrians usually play a role of the latter that gets involved awkwardly.

For instance, along the Federal Highway, the first highway in Malaysia, it is very common to see pedestrian steps which have been designed as a part of a refuge island which encourages pedestrians to walk across the highway. As a matter of fact, whether there are these pedestrian steps or not, it is almost a culture now in Malaysia that pedestrians always walk illogically within the vehicle system. This is due to the fact that newly constructed infrastructure always disrupts the existing dwellers' habitability, and they have been forced to walk across it, as it is placed in an inevitable location in their everyday living environment. In addition, the overhead pedestrian bridge is another interesting phenomenon. First, the number of the pedestrian bridges is fairly low, which again encourages pedestrians to walk directly across the roads that have no ground crossings. Secondly, the placed pedestrian bridges also notably follow the logic of those high-speed roads which are placed in a violent and arbitrary way. The overhead pedestrian bridge in modern urban design is considered an efficient solution to deliberate upon pedestrians' safety right to use the transportation network, particularly in some Asian cities that are characteristic of high density and complicated traffic situations caused by the urban fabric. The second context, Hong Kong, is one remarkable example that the overhead placement of walkways has successfully lifted the outdoor pedestrian network above the complicated and dangerous vehicle system merging with existing buildings and uniting the individual interior pedestrian networks which have been created respectively. In 2016, in Bandar Sunway, Malaysia, an overhead pedestrian bridge was built to connect a residential district to the newly introduced Sunway Line of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system that services the residents and commuters of Bandar Sunway and Subang Jaya (Figure 1). However, this cage-like pedestrian bridge, interestingly, has the length extended more than one kilometre with no exits in between. The audacious design with two exits at the ends of the bridge without access control monitoring connotes a serious risk of public security. The most inconceivable point of seeing this overhead pedestrian bridge is that, no matter whether in terms of the neighbourhood's built density or public accessibility, there is by no means a necessity to take such an act lifting a long 'cage' to service the pedestrian transit.



**Figure 1.** An overhead pedestrian bridge in Bandar Sunway, Malaysia. (Image by the author)

When compared to Hong Kong, locating itself as an Asian entity, Malaysia represents Asian historicity differently to what Hong Kong does. Ackbar Abbas suggested that Hong Kong architecture is characteristic of its receptivity to architectural styles, constant building and rebuilding, and an extreme enlargement of hyperdensity.<sup>9</sup> Asian urbanism is reflected in Hong Kong in terms of pedestrians is to reinforce the freedom and accessibility of the walkers – the visually unexpected pedestrian exists everywhere and the lifted pedestrian bridges above the vehicle transportation system allow walkers to quickly and safely travel within the city. Metropolitan Malaysia, in this sense, its architecture is rather characteristic of not receptivity but an ideological placement of architectural styles, not of constant building and rebuilding but interfering in building and rebuilding, and of not the enlargement of hyperdensity but a marginalisation of the existing accommodation of its spatiality. The freedom and accessibility that have been granted in Hong Kong therefore become problematic in metropolitan Malaysia in terms of a rational instrumentality; however, this problematic phenomenon indeed echoes the exemplified bracketing between the Hong Kong International Airport and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport. The ostensible difference of these forms of Asian urbanism would not be such obvious if the *bracketing* treatment was not applied to the architectural registration respectively.

Michel Foucault differentiated this form of subjectification from a general definition of an “author” to an “author function” which is characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation and functioning of certain discourses within a society. Foucault’s argument for the author function is rather systematic against what is usually called as an author that frequently refers to an individual. Scrutinising the representation of the contemporary Asia – Asia’s immediate historicity of architecture, some of Foucault’s points of an author function are particularly complementary.

First, Foucault argued that discourses are objects of appropriation, and the author function does not affect all discourses in a universal and constant way. Foucault also contended that the author function does not develop spontaneously as the attribution of a discourse to an individual, and it is not a pure and simple reconstruction made second-hand from an object given as inert material – it is always hybrid and subjective with a certain number of signs. Upon architectural phenomena in Asia, *Na Tuk Kong* shrines in Southeast Asia (Figure 2) transcribe the author function of the *Tu Ti Kung* temples into an eclectically built context of shared *Han* culture.



**Figure 2.** A *Na Tuk Kong* shrine in Malaysia. (Image by the author)

*Na Tuk Kong*, generally, refers to local guardian spirits worshipped in Southeast Asia, mainly in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. The term *Na Tuk* is connected to the indigenous languages, e.g. in Bahasa Melayu *Dato* or *Datuk*, for grandfather, and along with an honorific title *Kong* in *Han* it

refers to earth deities; particularly, the *Tu Ti Kung* popularised in shared *Han* culture is connected in the majority of the built and visual cases. In other words, *Na Tuk Kong* shrines, which are found in Southeast Asia, signify the same symbolism of worshipping an earth deity from *Tu Ti Kung* temples, which are found in mainly East Asia, but hybridise it with the built forms and representative subjects from local cultures and religion such as pre-Islamic religion and Sufism. Architecturally and visually, this hybridisation today is dominated and conspicuous in *Han* cultural representation as the emphasis of Islam does not worship local deities but Allah only, which explains the gradual retreat of the visual representation of *Na Tuk Kong* from the Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. Indians also worship *Na Tuk Kong* which is in a form closer to the pre-Islamic religion that is a spirit who has been idolised to avoid bad fortune; it also has not specific form in vision. These features of acculturation, however, can still be traced from most of the culturally *Han* dominated *Na Tuk Kong* shrines. Typically, a *Na Tuk Kong* shrine contains a carved status of *Na Tuk Kong*, an incense burner, a spirit's tablet and some instruments used in Taoist services. On the tablet, there are usually two noticeable *Han* characters *Tang* and *Fan* which signify the earth deities within and outside the context of the *Han* religion respectively. The eclectic *Na Tuk Kong* shrines which mutate from the comparatively simplistic and pure *Tu Ti Kung* temples hence demonstrate the author function that develops no spontaneous attribution of a discourse to an individual in a visual and architectural aspect.

From a typological perspective, the shophouse in Asia can be regarded as a remarkable case that is also suggested by the notion of *bracketing* in terms of the understanding of Asia's architectural history. In Asia, the shophouse can be traced in many countries with similarities and dissimilarities. In terms of its local applications, shophouses in Asia differ from each other in terms of ways of addressing local climates, customs and urban densities.

A shophouse in Southeast Asia is known in *Han* as *tien-wu*, which literally hints at the function to be used as a shop. In Singapore, shophouses are generally narrow and small terraced houses, with a sheltered pedestrian way at the front. These buildings are used for both business and living. Characteristically, a shophouse has a shop on the bottom floor and a residence above. Due to land limitations and the population increases, the shophouse today is no longer considered as a suitable building type in Singaporean housing; extant shophouses in Singapore are mainly ones that have been carefully restored and conserved according to the conservation guidelines. In Malaysia, there is a larger range, but the similar feature of a shophouse is a two- or three-storey building with a pedestrian way at the front that provides an open arcade and sheltered walkway. With the flexibility of scale, often business, such as cafés and stores, spills out to the street that are filled with activities created by a plethora of open markets and mobile food hawkers. Inside the shophouse, usually there is a central courtyard, which is sometimes reduced to a skylight when space becomes more precious.

In Taiwan, the shophouse is known in Taiwanese as *thau-thinn* or *tiam-bin*, which implies the building's united verticality and its shop-oriented front. Shophouses in Taiwan have now been extensively incorporated into one of the major local built forms. The typical pedestrian walkway at the front is even regulated in building codes for most of the urban areas, although, in different cases, the walkway can be unsheltered or be merged with the street network and landscape. Shophouses in Taiwan therefore have flexibility in terms of scale, material or use.

In Hong Kong, a shophouse is identified in Cantonese as *haa pou soeng geoi* or *tong-lau*, which identifies the functional layering of locating the shop on the bottom floor and the residence above, and its cultural affiliation to Chinese-ness. Shophouses in Hong Kong have also been referred to be as tenement houses describing the function of such buildings for tenement housing in response to the critical shortage of living quarters to accommodate the rising population. The introduction of a public housing policy in the 1950s in Hong Kong alleviated the problem occurred in its shophouses, yet this act also terminated the increase and expansion of shophouses in Hong Kong.

Amongst existing shophouses, the front pedestrian walkway without a doubt is the most iconic element, although it is no longer considered essential in some versions. In Southeast Asia, the pedestrian walkway of a shophouse is particularly branded as, in the Malay language, the *kaki lima*, literally the five-foot way. *Kaki lima* implies the five feet-ish wide of the walkway which is regionalised in Southeast Asia, although it is functioned exactly the same to other pedestrian walkways of the shophouse in Asia in order to provide pedestrians with a sheltered environment for passage away from the hot sun and torrential rain. One might argue that the five feet-ish wide of the walkway characteristic of a shophouse in Southeast Asia represents merely a sense of cultural consensus; interestingly, the 'five-foot way' is mandated in Singapore since its first town plan. In Taiwan, although the name of the five-foot way is not unknown,<sup>10</sup> and the walkway is also regulated in building codes; it is not limited at the scale of live feet, and it is widely recognised in Taiwanese as *ting-a-kioh* or in *Han* as *chi lou*. *Ting-a-kioh* hints at the origin of the name which came from early shophouses that usually had a continuous setting of temporary booths or verandas facing the main street; the reason is also to functionalise a continuously sheltered space that acts as either a walkway or the extension of the shops. As for *chi lou*, it signifies a direct image that this space is being 'ridden' by the building. In summary, the shophouse in Asia, if the typology is *bracketed* and considered being as a quotation in architectural historiography, it represents a container that collects a variety of architectural representations that might or might not interrelated in terms of the context, cultural-politics and involved subjectivity.

## Conclusion

The above-mentioned *bracketed* architectural phenomena emphasise an institutional organism that encircles and articulates the cosmos of discourse with different forms of representation. This system is defined by a series of individual or complicated processes, and it does not refer to an individual but several subjects, i.e. positions located from the processes can be engaged by different classes of individuals. The act of *bracketing* in architectural historiography can be understood as a description of the cultural framework of the Self which discourses the politics of identity. Through a process from *bracketing* to framing in the examination of architectural phenomena in Asia, the cultural politics of subject position is conspicuous for the degree to which space figures. It figures in the metaphors that are now nearly ritually incanted; it figures in the degree to which interstitial localities and cultural-political subjectivity tend to become the witness that are drawn on; and it figures at the level of which a locality is entitled to ground discourses of Asian architecture through historiography. Asia's experiences of colonisation have a feature – these experiences impose a unique form of ideological intertextuality mingling diachronic and synchronic colonisations. Asia's diachronic colonisations are usually continuously colonial experiences. Amongst many cases, Hong Kong's encounters with the Japanese Empire, the British Empire, and the current internal colonisation experienced from the Communist China; the Spanish, the American and the Japanese's colonial rule over the Philippines; and Taiwan's colonial histories that are conducted by the Manchu Ching Empire, the Japanese Empire and the contemporary character of the ROC's internal colonisation are all evidence. Asia's synchronic colonisations are characteristic of the multiracial and multicultural character of Asia's immigrant society. In Asia, the character of colonies is not always associated solely with exploitation or immigration but sometimes involves both. Therefore, as colonies, many Asian cases are characteristic of both being exploited and immigrant, i.e. this kind of colony is shaped by a hierarchically dominant structure which levels at the colonisers, different immigrant communities and the natives. Diachronic and synchronic colonisations in Asia, frequently, are interrelated in a spatiotemporal way along with the postcolonial indigenisation movements represented in different cultural forms.

This intertextual relationship of diachronic and synchronic colonisations in Asia suggests a difficulty of approaching the understanding of Asia's postcolonial situations – the multi-layered synchronic colonisation that is positioned in the historical structure of the diachronic colonisation often blocks the consensus-making of identifying the meaning of Asia's history. Through the incorporation into the

*bracketing* of its historicity, this difficulty, rather than being depicted as a clueless entanglement, represents the standpoints that are placed in different cultural-political positions in the power-knowledge hierarchy. The employment of *bracketing* as a methodology of quoting Asia in the discourses of architectural history, therefore, can be concluded in a twofold argument – on the one hand, architecture positioned in history suggests an interactive framing of time and places; and, on the other hand, ‘these’ time and places can be multi-accentually defined by a variety of the immediate historicity, such as the one in Asia. In the context of architectural history, this argument entitles the texts of cultural-political spatiality that become marked by the inscriptions of hegemonic world history in the making of globalism in the spaces of the present.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The ideas of phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing history* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking history* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the other, or, the prosthesis of origin* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> The weakening means exercised through the imposition of prejudiced pleading.

<sup>6</sup> Munslow, *Deconstructing history*.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, method, and epistemology* (New York: New Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, *Aesthetics, method, and epistemology*.

<sup>9</sup> Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: culture and the politics of disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> The Taiwanese architectural historian Chian Lang Lee indicates that the pedestrian walkway of the shophouse sometimes can be identified in Taiwanese as *goo-kiuh-ke* or *goo-kiuh-khi*, which came from a direct translation of the name 'five feet base' that represents the unique pedestrian walkway type of a shophouse in Singapore or Malaysia. For more information, see Chian Lang Lee, *Illustrated dictionary of Taiwan's historical architecture* (Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing, 2003).

