

PICTURESQUE MODERNITIES

ARCHITECTURAL REGIONALISM AS A GLOBAL PROCESS (1890-1950)

International Conference
(Paris, 30 November – 2 December 2016)

German Center for Art History Paris
Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context", Heidelberg University
Centre André Chastel (University Paris-Sorbonne)
CRIHAM (University of Poitiers)
Association française des Historiens de l'Architecture (A.H.A.)

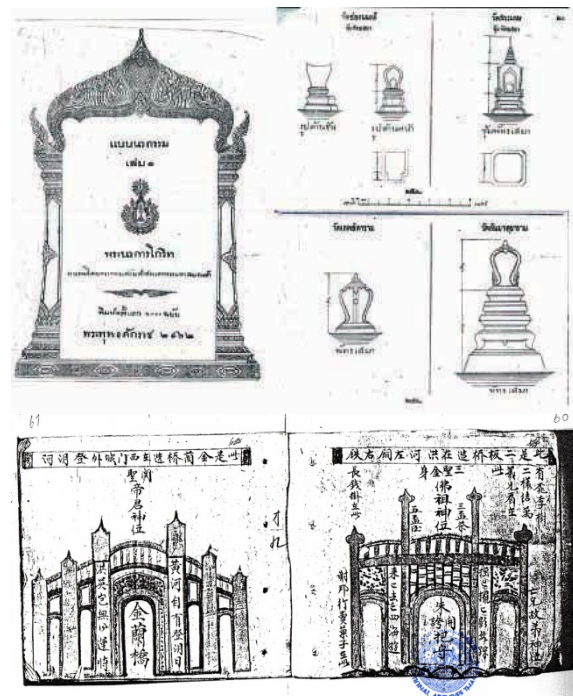
Manuals and Models of Utopia: Intersecting Transregionalism and the Reorganization of the Building Trades in early 20th-century Bangkok/Siam

Lawrence Chua
Syracuse University

Abstract

This paper compares the utopian cityscapes produced by two powerful and conflicting homosocial institutions in early 20th-century Bangkok: the "City of Willows" of Chinese migrant secret societies and Dusit Thani, the miniature democratic city of the royal court. As the court sought to exert its authority over a growing urban population, these two models of utopia revealed much about the reorganization of the building trades as new trans-regional migrations of construction labor (between the southern coast of China and Bangkok) and architectural expertise (from Turin to Bangkok by way of Moscow and Istanbul) intersected in early 20th-century Bangkok. While the City of Willows served as the model for the secret lodges of the all-male labor force that dominated the building trades, Dusit Thani was a highly-detailed utopian landscape built by King Rama VI and his courtiers in the gardens of Dusit Palace. An eclectic collection of over 300 miniature structures that borrowed liberally from European, colonial, and regional precedents, Dusit Thani included fully electrified private houses, theaters, cinemas, banks, palaces, a regularly convened bicameral parliament, as well as a constitution, a police force, fire department, a tax system, and three

newspapers. Juxtaposing clandestinely-circulated secret society manuals against the mediated landscape of Dusit Thani and the state's first official building manuals that reformatted regional forms into a "national style," opens up an aperture into the role of regional actors in the development of modern architecture across diverse and uneven geographies. Turning not only to the architects and draughtsmen but laborers, craftsmen, engineers, speculators, and compradors embedded within the trans-regional circulation of forms, materials, and ideas produces a more nuanced picture of the relationships between "center" and "periphery" in the growth of the built environment in Asia.



Above: Cover and examples of monastic boundary markers from an early 20th-century manual produced by the Thai state for unskilled migrant workers in building monastic complexes in the central regional idiom.

Below: Gates to the "City of Willows," from an early 20th-c. secret society manual impounded by Bangkok police.