The 'Shanghai Plaster' –
A study on colonial agencies in Asian modern architecture, 1927-1937

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Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the role of cement in the shaping of architectural and urban culture before 1960s. Current narratives often date the birth of Hong Kong’s modern urban culture to the 1960s, where the modern, “brutal” aesthetics of exposed concrete and cement were extensively used. This dissertation seek to expand these discussions by understanding the “pre-history” of these aesthetics, through analysing how the production, culture and labour of cement in modern architecture before the 1960s influenced the emergence of modern architecture in Hong Kong, and how the knowledge, representation and technique associated with cement circulated within the colonial geopolitical network, one that was constituted by both Western and Asian agents, in the Asian Pacific region. By studying the associations between cement and modern aesthetics and how was it represented in text and images, the thesis propose an alternative way to historicize modern architecture, one that rely less on the biographies of architects and more on architecture’s patronage, audienceship, labour, in attempt to map the plurality of the material before the 1960s and position cement as a proactive element in a modern architectural movement that was shaped by a transnational network of regional and global knowledge and culture.

Keyword: Asian, Colonial, Modern Architecture, Cement, Transnational