

# Introduction

*No!*

**Inside the Japanese architect Itō Chūta's personally stamped copy of** James Fergusson's famous architectural history text, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, a scribbled "No!" screams from the margins. The offending passage reads: "The Chinese have chosen the humbler path of life, and with singular success. There is not perhaps a more industrious or, till the late wars, happier people on the face of the globe; but they are at the same time singularly deficient in every element of greatness, either political or artistic."<sup>1</sup> The claim provoked his pencil for several reasons. First, it smacked of a familiar anti-Asian racism that he encountered over and over while studying architecture through European textbooks. Born in 1867 and educated during the sweeping Westernization that followed the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Itō was fluent in German and English and well read in European world histories of architecture. He also ironically encountered phrases like "The Japanese do not belong to one of the building races of mankind" while studying in a rapidly modernizing Tokyo.<sup>2</sup> Second, if China was "singularly deficient in every element of greatness," then so was Japan because, as he was keenly aware, its culture had been fundamentally linked to the mainland—and through it, the world—for centuries. Lastly, he knew that many European architectural historians had never stepped foot in Japan or visited many of the Asian sites that they so easily dismissed. By the time Fergusson published this book in 1876, Japanese architecture had been packaged and presented on the world stage several times, including not least of all at the 1873 Vienna World's Fair where Japan's architectural re-creations were met with enthusiastic response. Soon after, Europe was in the throes of Japan-mania, represented in the explosion of Japonisme and

wide trade of imported objects that clearly generated “interest beyond the shores of the islands themselves.”<sup>3</sup> Had Fergusson seen Japan beyond these idealized reconstructions, he would have found the wooden architecture he detested being replaced with new iron-and-brick structures and classrooms full of students dutifully taking notes from his books, which were made mandatory in all history classes. Itō, on the other hand, was well traveled. Before making his marginalia, he had explored his own country and even circumnavigated the globe between 1902 and 1905, going far further in his pursuit of accumulating firsthand evidence than many other historians of the era. His disagreement, then, was not just an abstract condemnation of European racial bias but an assured critique of how historical knowledge was created. The “No!” pried apart two contrasting practices of observation; one content with scanning secondary reports and excluding the unfamiliar, and the other dedicated to personally observing Asian architecture and recognizing its connectedness to world history.

What, though, did it mean to observe architecture in modern Japan, and why was it so important? At the Imperial College of Engineering (Kōbu Daigakkō), the nation’s first postsecondary school for architecture, engineering, and science, observation and architecture were explicitly joined. The school began in 1871 as a small set of ad-hoc classrooms called the Engineering Dormitory (Kogakuryō), but quickly outgrew its limited space to become a full-fledged college in 1873, and finally moved into its own purpose-built building in 1877. The college’s immersive English-language curriculum was designed to make not only good architects but “good observers” and required all students, regardless of specialization, to enroll in science classes, take object lessons, conduct experiments, and pursue naturalist study to sharpen this skill. Observation was respected by both Japanese bureaucrats and European specialists as necessary to modernization and was treated as a national responsibility, one that was so important that the school’s Scottish director made it the theme of his graduation address, leaving students with one final assignment as they left for the professional world: “Your first duty then is to Observe.”<sup>4</sup> In its most general sense, this duty to observe was defined through European pedagogies of natural science as a learned practice of sustained attention, direct or mediated, systematically executed and socially controlled to stabilize an object toward correlated knowledge. However, when young Japanese architecture students later reappraised the central tenant of their education and translated it into Japanese, the resulting definitions and practices were very different from, and at times antagonistic to, what was being taught.

Itō’s critique of both Fergusson and his faulty observations was part of a broader shift in the Japanese perception of the West. Itō came of age in

the late 1880s when the mania for European-style “civilization and enlightenment” (*bunmei kaika*) had cooled. In its place was a profound skepticism of Westernization and a desire to preserve (and therefore create) Japanese heritage.<sup>5</sup> Prasenjit Duara describes this duality as inherent to civilization-al discourse in the nineteenth century, arguing that “the tension between nationalism and transnationalism within civilization reflects the tension between universalism and particularism underlying the world system of nation-states.”<sup>6</sup> Itō and his contemporaries played with this tension and strategically translated and adapted Western concepts, practices, and disciplines to serve a specifically Japanese mission. Art historians worked to prove that Japan’s art historical legacy had its own distinct chronology of development, while philosophers strove to show that Japan’s intellectual history was in fact sympathetic to global standards and was not just a set of outmoded ideas to be tossed away. The historian Mark Ravina calls this a process of “cosmopolitan chauvinism,” where Meiji-era intellectuals carefully placed invented traditions into a conceptual array that simultaneously meshed with international standards while protecting Japanese uniqueness.<sup>7</sup> Scholars used new words like “art” (*bijutsu*), “philosophy” (*tetsugaku*), and “religion” (*shūkyō*) to redefine past cultural practices as either helpful or hurtful to the mission of national cosmopolitanism.<sup>8</sup> The double invention of “architecture” (*kenchiku*) and “observation” (*kansatsu*) follows a similar trajectory.

Itō called the contested creation of architecture and observation an ongoing “architectural dialogue.” He visualized this dialogue in a student sketch of the same name showing two anthropomorphized buildings gathered close for a chat. Europe is represented by a Gothic-style gable outfitted in a suit jacket, sitting next to Japan represented by a *karahafu*, or Chinese-style gabled roof, wrapped in a formal men’s outfit called *haori hakama*. The Japanese subject is not learning from the Western teacher, as would have been the case in so many representations of early Meiji professional education—this is not an image of “architectural command.” Rather, the two are posed as distinct entities able to communicate on an even plane through their shared modernity. But what are they talking about? The drawing’s caricatured cultural representations of East and West lead us to believe they are rehearsing the familiar narrative of Japan’s modernization following the Meiji Restoration. The story goes that the militaristic arrival of the United States at Japan’s doorstep precipitated internal unrest and the eventual “opening” of the country to a bevy of European influences and interested actors, resulting in an explosion of industrial capitalism, nationalism, empire, and a collective self-interrogation of what it meant to be “Japanese.” It is a two-person play starring two exaggerated characters, the East and the West, that has been told many times.<sup>9</sup> This is of course not to suggest that

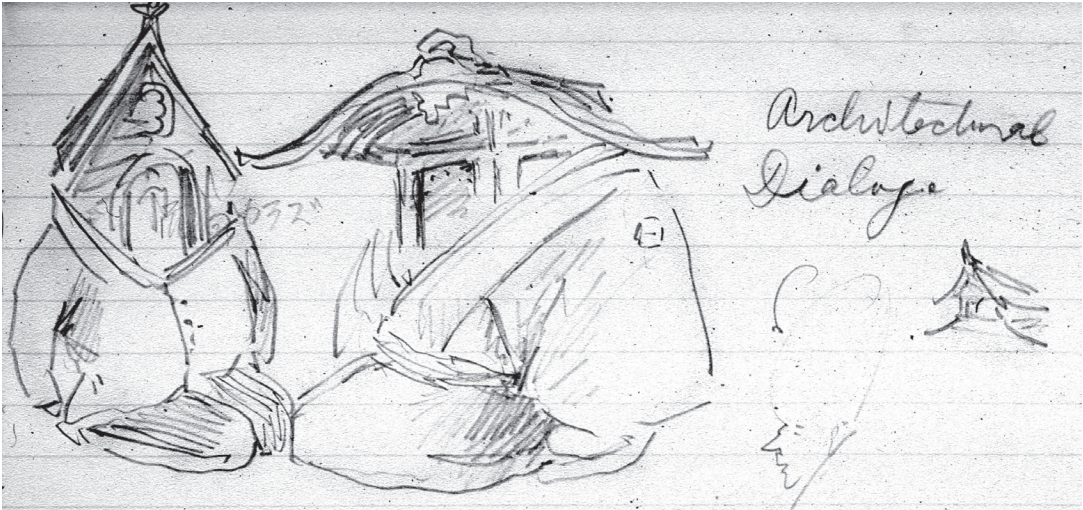


Figure I.2. Undated excerpt from Itō Chūta's student notebooks, ca. 1890. Photo courtesy of Don Choi.

this story is wrong or unproductive, but it has unfortunately limited our understanding of Japan's architectural history.<sup>10</sup> The flattening of the Meiji story encourages us to use buildings as simple illustrations of the East-West conundrum. Reading banks with decorative wooden bracketing or Beaux-Arts volumes topped with flared eaves as logos of a bipolar history diminishes the global complexity of the era.

If we listen closely to the two buildings' conversation, we can hear another "No!" aimed not at Fergusson but at us, telling us to look beyond the all-too-familiar bifurcation of Japan's modernization. Some scholars have recently heeded the call. New histories of the Meiji Restoration have worked to move past the stereotyped abstractions of East and West to consider the global dimensions of Japan's quick ascent to "stand with the nations of the world."<sup>11</sup> In Japan, the genre of *gurōbaru hisutorī* has led to new histories of the country but also to translations of key foreign texts and even manga-fied histories for schoolchildren.<sup>12</sup> Itō's work is an important part of this still-expanding story. His struggle to create a world history of architecture shows that the "global" is not just a contemporary historiographic imposition. That he felt compelled to compare Japanese architecture with examples from Mexico, China, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, and Gandhara illustrates the ways that "Japan" was defined through a global matrix. And that he went so far as to circumnavigate the globe to substantiate his comparisons with firsthand experience shows just how important observation was to his project. The following book is about the enmeshment of these two obsessions.





Figure I.3. Itō Chūta self-portrait. From Itō Chūta, “Ukiyo no tabi” [Travels of the floating world], Itō Chūta Materials, archive 40011–400117, 1890, Architectural Institute of Japan (AIJ). Courtesy of the AIJ Architectural Museum.

### Who Is Itō Chūta?

Fergusson never heard Itō’s critiques; that exuberant “No!” reverberated only as far as the book’s margins. Like most other architectural historians working in Europe or the United States at the time, Fergusson likely had

little idea his discipline even existed in Japan. Though hardly known in the English-speaking world, Itō casts a large shadow across Japanese-language historiography, appearing in histories of art, architecture, theory, preservation, pedagogy, and politics from the Meiji period to the Second World War. He is remembered as the author of the first Japanese-language piece of long-form architectural history (on the seventh-century Buddhist temple Hōryūji), a champion for cultural heritage and preservation, a theorist of the modern word “architecture” (*kenchiku*) itself, a longstanding professor of architecture at the University of Tokyo and Waseda University, and both a designer of and an advisor to some of the country’s most prominent buildings. His work had international extensions as well, serving as a medium between Western and Eastern theoretical vocabularies and later shaping architectural history, theory, design, and education in China, where his books were translated and implemented as the basis of their burgeoning architecture curriculum.<sup>13</sup> Given his vast career, any attempt to encapsulate it all into a comprehensible narrative would either succumb to superficiality or become a sprawling, indigestible omnibus. What follows is not an encyclopedic account of his life. My focus is narrower, less biography and more a kind of surgery to extract from his multifaceted and multimedia project an explanation for how the knowledge gleaned from world architectural history could bolster world empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I follow Itō from busy classrooms in Tokyo to the bewildering world of field research to the halls of governmental power where he helped export architecture to Japan’s colonies. Connecting these different positions and perspectives were two goals: make a world history of architecture and teach people how to observe the world like him.

Itō’s curious historiographical position as both a national hero and an international unknown is the result of a strategic PR campaign that began shortly after his death in 1954.<sup>14</sup> He passed in the aftermath of the Second World War and the American occupation, a period when many prominent figures whose careers spanned both eras, prewar modernization and wartime militarization, were being nimbly placed in the historical record to portray a country forever redeemed of its former evils. Itō’s obituary in the national newspaper *Mainichi Shinbun* reads:

Itō Chūta: Engineer, artist, member of the Architecture Association, and famous teacher at the University of Tokyo, passed away from old age on the 7th of this month at 10 in the evening in his home in Bunkyo, Tokyo. He was 87 years old. A funeral service will be held on the evening of the 10th at the Tsukiji Honganji Temple. Born in 1867, he graduated in 1892 from the

Imperial University of Tokyo's architecture program. In 1902 he traveled to China, India and Turkey to study Oriental architecture, and returned to teach at the Imperial University of Tokyo in 1905. Following his research of historical Japanese architecture, he designed the Meiji Shrine, the Kanto Earthquake Memorial Hall and the Tsujiki Honganji Temple. In 1943, he was given an Order of Culture, and in 1949 he was recognized as making outstanding contributions to Japanese culture. His works are collected in "Itō Chūta's Architectural Documents" and his comics are collected in his "Ashura Notebooks."

Conspicuously scrubbed of any reference to war or colonialism, this abridged biography was repeated in books for decades after Itō's death. It is representative of a particular genre of "postwar" writing designed to disguise the country's imperial history. The historian Carol Gluck describes Japan's postwar (*senjo*) era as not so much a temporal period than a multifaceted project to establish the year 1945 as the beginning of a new national story free of everything that was "fascist, imperialist, militarist, oligopolist [and] landlord exploitative."<sup>15</sup> The new Japan punished its war criminals, self-audited its political ideology, and joined America as a global capitalist powerhouse championing liberal causes and the rights of an ascendent middle class. The conceptual engine of this process was an "imaginary of connection/disconnection" propagated by historians and governmental officials eager to describe the present and future as an "inversion of the prewar."<sup>16</sup> A strategy of inversion is convenient in politics where former leaders can be easily painted as villains, but in disciplines like art and architecture where predecessors are heralded as heroic "forefathers," inversion is a trickier proposition. What to do with someone like Itō, who is foundational to Japan's "global" aspirations yet poisonous to the country's desire to obscure its colonial past?

The preservation and memorialization of Itō's surviving buildings—nearly all of which are categorized as National Important Cultural Properties—illustrates the difficulty of simultaneously lauding the forefather of architectural history and blurring his imperial motivations. The most spectacular of these conflicted memorials is no doubt the Tsukiji Honganji. The temple was completed in 1934 as the culmination of a multidecade relationship between Itō and Honganji, a powerful and influential sect of True Pure Land Buddhism (*Jōdo Shinshū*). The building is a kaleidoscopic assemblage of what Itō called "affinities" (*shinwa*) between global architectural traditions. What at first glance seems like copy-and-paste eclecticism is in fact an architectural game of "mental association," encouraging the keen observer to discover latent connections between disparate



Figure I.4. Itō Chūta, Tsukiji Honganji, Tokyo, 1934. Tsukiji Honganji, Chūō ward, Tokyo, 2019 © Kakidai (Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0).

cultures. For example, the building's massing of volumes reflects Beaux-Arts principles, including an elevated base, a portico entryway, and a symmetrical plan featuring a "domed" central building and two matching wings. The arrangement is also a reference to the building complex that once stood on the site, the Edo-Asakusa Gobo, that featured a massive hip-and-gable central hall (*kondō*) fronted by a gate (*karamon*) and flanked by subtemples. The new temple facade plays a similar trick. It is patterned with a row of engaged columns, an element that is found in both European Beaux-Arts architecture and Buddhist temples (variously called *hanbashira* or *katabutabashira*), including the famous gallery (*kairō*) walls at Hōryūji. The built affinities can also be more broadly intra-Asian and global, like the elongated stupas that echo Borobudur, or the portico that is at once a pediment, a curved gable (*karahafu*), and a reference to the prayer halls (*chaityas*) at the Ajanta caves in India.<sup>17</sup>

The temple is often described as an example of "Pan-Asian" thinking, whose hybridizations represent Japan's wartime dream of uniting Asia under colonial control.<sup>18</sup> Lurking beneath the overt propaganda, however, is a pair of ideas that connect Itō's buildings to his world history project. The first is "substitution," a complex theory of historical change that Itō



developed to describe how architectural motifs, such as columnar entasis or the acanthus leaf, move and change across long geographical and temporal expanses. The temple performs his idea by “substituting” wooden architectural elements such as columns and bracketing into reinforced concrete to best reflect the modern “ideals of the people.” The second key theory guiding the building’s design is the “Asuka pattern,” a unique inflection of ornamental curvature that Itō identified as beginning in Japan’s Asuka period (538–710 CE). Buddhism was officially introduced and institutionalized in Japan during this period, giving Itō the chance to survey the differences between mainland Asian Buddhist art and Japanese Buddhist art to isolate a unique ornamental angle that captured a nascent Japanese “taste.” The appearance of the curve throughout the temple represents the end goal of Itō’s world historical project: to transform historical motifs from around the globe into an identifiably “Japanese” shape.

Despite the temple’s historical and historiographical importance, it is popular for a much different reason: monsters. A 2015 projection mapping performance organized by the temple entitled “The Story of Tsukiji Honganji Illuminated by Light” exemplifies its curious contemporary fame. Using high-powered projectors and computers, the building’s central facade was turned into a three-dimensional screen to narrate the architect and patron’s shared ideology. The performance begins with a glittering wave of green orbs that coalesce and trace the edges of the building’s elevation, highlighting the contrast between the building’s perpendicular facade and sinuous semidomes. The lines fade into a wash of rainbow-colored tiles and then collapse into fiery rubble, referencing the temple’s destruction in the 1657 Great Fire of Meireki and the 1923 Great Kantō earthquake. Out of the flittering ashes, a world map appears, first Japan, then Asia, and then a meandering pink line tracing an eastward route from Central Asia to Tokyo. The map disappears to reveal two silhouettes with matching beating red hearts: on the right is Itō, and on the left is Ōtani Kōzui, the notorious head abbot of Honganji who traveled across Asia in the early twentieth century collecting evidence of Buddhism’s transmission to Japan. Silhouettes of camels and researchers traveling through Asia move across the facade and we see the team discovering Buddhist relics, but not their subsequent looting. Darkness then swallows the building and a flurry of Japanese folkloric monsters (*yōkai*) dance across the facade. Similar creatures can also be found throughout the temple complex as sculpted ornament, figurative “affinities” between Japanese folkloric monsters and imagined beasts throughout the world. Each of the creatures is sourced from Itō’s notebooks, scaled up from small sketches to dramatize his whimsical creativity. Though animated, the stories of Ōtani’s and Itō’s



Figure I.5. Projection mapping performance on the facade of Tsukiji Honganji during the “Goen” celebration, March 14, 2015.

lives are flat caricatures of an explorer without the looting and an architect who apparently lived more in his mind than in the world.

While lasers bounced off the temple, Itō’s other nearby structure, the 1930 Tokyo Memorial Hall was undergoing renovations. The group responsible for the memorial complex (Tokyo-to Irei Kyōkai) commissioned an artist to create *kawaii* versions of his monstrous ornament and print them on pamphlets and construction barrier fences, presenting the architect as a kind of Pokémon-master avant la lettre. Itō would be pained by the irony of his “grotesque” celebrity. He spent much of his early career hiding his monster research, keeping it in his private notebooks for fear that it did not qualify as “observation” in the eyes of his more empiricist colleagues. Given his stature, Itō could never be “inverted” into an avatar of pure architectural villainy. Instead, the dimensions of his work have been transformed from a globally expansive imperial project into private visions that, in the words of Itō popularizer Saitō Eisuke, “seemingly come from a different world.”<sup>19</sup>

In addition to popular magazines and television shows, Itō’s strategic placement in architectural history plays out in museums.<sup>20</sup> For example, in 2018, Tokyo’s prominent Mori Art Museum hosted *Japan in Architecture*: