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GLOCALISING CONSERVATION

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Abstract: *Researchers and international bodies such as UNESCO have begun to acknowledge the plurality of cultures, and therefore the importance of addressing each region's needs on its own terms. However, some conservation practitioners on the ground have been slower to recognise the importance of seeing their own contexts from a 'glocal' point of view. The future of cultural heritage conservation relies on increasing intra-regional dialogue, while continuing to share findings and best practices with the conservation community internationally.*

Keywords: conservation, glocal, best practices, international standards, region

Heritage, as an institutional practice, aims to preserve selected remains from the past (Esposito, 2014:20) that can then be presented in the future as important to the understanding of these remains' original context(s). One of the many ways in which this is done is through the collection or acquisition of objects identified as being important to, or representative of, that context. These specimens of specific time/places are then strung together to form an approximation of a narrative of history and heritage through cultural objects and sites. Arguably, the human agency involved in this highly subjective process can be problematic when one object or even one culture's recognition is privileged over another. In particular, the context of this decision-making – the intersection(s) of socio-historical influences and individual preferences – often goes unremarked, much less examined. This is potentially contentious, especially given that these fragments are then retroactively woven into a narrative that becomes a part, if not all, of a culture's self-identity.

This desire to collect and acquire objects – essentially, the drive behind the institutional practice of heritage as we now understand it – was born in Western Europe and was later 'exported' to its colonies, including those in Asia, beginning in the second half of the 19th century (Esposito, 2014: 20). Notions of 'heritage' in this sense are currently understood worldwide, this is mainly based on material authenticity, aesthetic qualities and historical values (Chan et. al, 2014: 22). This bears the trappings of its original cultural backgrounds, and may not necessarily be representative of how individual cultures perceive, experience, and choose to embody their own ideas of heritage. Whilst the practice of collection and acquisition has its roots in Western European values and belief systems, scholars working in contexts outside the region have played a paramount role in engaging with and deconstructing the basic assumptions underlying established practices in heritage management.

Conservation as a Contextual Discipline:

Conservation as a discipline has, quite naturally, mirrored to a large extent the institutional practice of heritage in terms of its historical trajectory and development.

Moreover, the care of cultural material continues to be useful in wider discussions about cultural heritage. Questions about the ethics of cultural heritage conservation – such as what should be conserved, and who should make these decisions – inevitably both reflect and have some influence on what constitutes ‘heritage’ from an institutional point of view.

It should be noted that this paper uses the term ‘South-East Asia’ as a purely geographic point of reference. This may seem limiting and essentialising, however, the case study provides us with a sufficiently complex example which can be used to discuss the need to take a glocal – and not a global, or a local – approach to the care of cultural heritage materials and therefore, by extension, its constitution.

The discipline of conservation is considered young (Pye & Sully, 2014: 19), and its development as a mature discipline will be contingent with the development of several surrounding issues, such as ‘the ability to define requirements for what constitutes new knowledge’ and ‘an effective communications network’ (Davies & Devlin cited in Sloggett, 2009: 173). Current developments, however, have been ‘framed predominantly by the practice, protocols and knowledge related to collecting institutions and their agents’, with a ‘reliance on values such as verifiability and reproducibility’ (Sloggett, 2009: 173). The development of conservation as a discipline in South-East Asia therefore reflects a wider truth about the nature of globalisation; it does not, contrary to what one might expect, produce an imagined community that is both international and homogenous. Instead, it results in a ‘mobility of ideas’ (Tan, 2010: 8) that are then interpreted, adopted, and/or eventually adapted on the ground within each facet of this imagined community. One result of globalisation, and therefore this ‘mobility of ideas’, is the development of contemporary Asian art practice and a heightened interest in its collection. This increased interest in the collection of contemporary Asian art has necessitated greater attention to the care of such collections.

However, while conservation practices in Europe and the United States have their origins in 19th century enlightenment theories (Sloggett 2009, p.71), in South-East Asia, conservation as a disciplinary practice is linked to the establishment of museums. Moreover, the museum in its current form is ‘the cultural product of Western history, and its concept was not domesticated by Asia until the twentieth century’ (Wu 2006: 2). However, the protection of cultural and heritage assets, in the broadest sense, has been active in the South-East Asian region much longer and is linked to traditional and local practices and values (Agrawal, 1975:155). It was not until the late 1980s to 1990s that contemporary art museums came into focus, as the ‘preservation of an indigenous cultural heritage was initially the goal of many national museums in the region, which in turn ‘reflected an effort to foster the expression of a localised cultural identity’ (Chiu & Genocchio, 2010: 24).

This is particularly evident in the context of contemporary art practice in South-East Asia, which has developed along a trajectory different from that of European or Northern American contemporary art. Although South-East Asia is linked to and influenced by the globalised world, locating South-East Asian contemporary art is complex as it does not follow the ‘Western’ trajectory, and thus resists a ‘Western’ concept of contemporary art (Seng, 2012: 116). Before the convergence of contemporary art and globalisation, South-East Asian artists already had strong local traditions that had derived from different cultural environments and histories. These are rooted in how the visual arts in the region have conveyed core and broad cultural values ‘across the boundaries of temporal, linguistic and geographical differences for centuries’ (Leuthold, 2011: xi). The definitions of contemporary art according to the customary knowledge systems have been categorised chronologically, following art history and artistic movements, and are considered to encompass works from the 1970s to the present day (Schädler-Saub, 2010: 3). However, categorisations of what ‘contemporary art’ might encompass within the context of the South-East Asian region are not validated by the same European and Northern American historical timelines.

Instead, a definition of 'contemporary art' in South-East Asia is more comparable to the broad spectrum of art forms in the region, and should recognise the plurality of artistic, philosophical and social expressions of the place (Chiu & Genocchio, 2010: 3). While this is an example specific to South-East Asia, each culture has its own socio-historical contexts which shape their cultural heritage and the objects that are then collected as part of a narrative of this heritage.

Nermin Sayasili, in his paper 'Gesturing no(w)here', argues that the concept of the global is often structured within a localized entity (2011: 410). Paul Virillo's proposed term 'glocalisation' – which addresses this new framework of globalisation within a localised context and considerations (cited in Sayasili, 2011: 412) – provides a way to engage with Zijlman's argument that 'art history is not global' (2007: 289). Its implication is therefore that approaches to the care of cultural materials cannot ignore local specificities, even as globalisation appears to blur the boundaries of these specificities. A glocal understanding of each collection, and thus a glocal understanding of the care of it, is therefore necessary to the consideration of disciplinary strategies for conservation and collection care. It has been argued that although international frameworks continue to be helpful as one of many points of reference, they alone cannot be adequate in addressing the regionally-specific nature of the collections that come into the care of practitioners.

Glocalisation and Platforms for Dialogue:

This is not to say that there has been no attempt within the broad field of conservation to acknowledge the plurality of cultures, and therefore addressing the importance of each region's needs on its own terms. As early as 1975, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) acknowledged that the Asian region varies from the European traditions of art and the meaning of conservation, and that 'ignorance of these matters has often been disastrous' (Agrawal, 1975: 155). However, some conservation practitioners on the ground have been slower to recognise the importance of seeing their own contexts from a glocal point of view. These practitioners choose instead to refer to international standards derived from Euro-American studies – such as studies on environmental and climate conditions – that on a practical level, have very little immediate relevance to the needs of individual collections.

Furthermore, the relative paucity of intra-regional dialogue regarding best practices leads to practitioners on the ground choosing to adopt and adapt international standards as a stepping stone to developing their own best practices. This is because individual practitioners or groups of practitioners remain unaware that more relevant practices are already being developed in the region. This tends to lead to the wasting of resources, through the unnecessary replication of adaptation efforts, where these resources could have been channelled to the development of other best practices, had there been greater intra-regional dialogue about developments within the discipline. Moreover, network groups such as Asia Pacific Tropical Climate Conservation Art Research Network (APTCCARN) and the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art – Asia Pacific (INCCA-AP) provide a platform on which practitioners and conservators in the region can share research findings and projects with fellow network members. However, the different languages and dialects used across the region continue to pose potential challenges to a completely open dialogue across the region. This is not, however, to disparage inter-regional dialogue, which continues to contribute to the development of the discipline as a whole. Instead, we argue that the future of cultural heritage conservation – and its development as a

mature discipline – relies on increasing intra-regional dialogue, while continuing to share findings and best practices with the broader conservation community internationally.

Bridging the Gap:

The discussion in this paper has utilised a more comparative approach in illustrating our argument for a more glocal approach to the practices of cultural heritage conservation. In order for conservation to mature as a discipline in this international age, there remains a need for the field, as a whole, to move farther away from the artificial binaries of ‘international’ and ‘local’, and instead to address each collection and its needs on its own terms. As the care of collections is both influenced by and influences perceptions of what material objects should be considered part of a culture’s heritage, the manner in which this care is administered needs greater consideration. The development of best practices should thus reflect an informed consideration of the specific nature and therefore necessary care of each collection, in order to responsibly present and conserve what comes to be regarded as heritage.

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