

Modes of comparison for structures of modernity



John Clark's most recent publication contributes to a growing body of work that responds to the still perplexing issue of how to expand our understanding of modernity as expressed through art and visual culture. In particular, he attempts to complicate the notion of a modernity that has conventionally been presented as a process originating from the West and then transmitted to other parts of the world, most notably those countries that experienced colonialism.

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Lord Buddha Said
"If You See Dhamma,
You See Me".
Installation made of
shredded Thai baht
bank notes, by Kamin
Lertchaiprasert
(2003), standing at
the Singapore Art
Museum. Photo by
Pamela Corey.

Reviewed publication:

John Clark. 2011.

Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai Art Compared, 1980-1999,
Sydney: Power Publications.
272 pages, ISBN: 9780909952389 (paperback).

CLARK'S TEXT IS INDEED A VALUABLE CONTRIBUTION, in its comprehensive and dense accumulation of empirical data garnered over an extensive research period of some ten years, and given Clark's in-depth knowledge of the Asian region and its numerous art histories. If one traces Clark's work back to *Modern Asian Art* (University of Hawaii, 1998) and through his other numerous articles and texts, it is evident that he continues to be preoccupied with the project of finding a methodology applicable to studying modern Asian art – one that distinguishes itself from the seemingly universal theoretical tools and paradigms on which the discipline of art history is founded, which is primarily in response to the canon of Euro-American art. It is for this reason that many of his articles and books have focused on comparative studies, and that he has endeavored to establish structural models and specific languages to attempt to characterize the kinds of artistic developments and cultural transactions that have taken place within Asia, and in particular, the various forms of artistic encounters Asian cultures have had with the West. To counter institutionalized conceptions of what constitutes artistic modernity (as something only truly tangible through European and American examples), Clark has spent much of his career attempting to map a type of genealogy or system of interlinked trajectories of modernity in Asian art. This text, comparing developments in Thai and Chinese art between 1980 to 1999, therefore continues his project of establishing comparable systems of mapping modernity and therefore "mapping

a space in the art discourse" (64) in order to find parallel dimensions of the modern. Ultimately this is an effort to disrupt what is commonly perceived as a type of linear developmental model, from which Euro-American modernism is the primary agent of transformation in various Asian artistic contexts.

One principle question that has to be addressed initially is Clark's choice of comparing China and Thailand. This is perhaps an unusual comparison, given the critical and commercial attention Chinese contemporary art has received since the 1990s, and its high demand on the global art circuit, in comparison with Thai art, which – along with its neighboring countries in Southeast Asia – is perhaps only known for a handful of artists who have attained a reputation on the international contemporary art stage. One might question the merit of comparing two such unlike cultural and social systems, which have very little in common in terms of state-social relations, economic political systems, types of institutional apparatuses, and perhaps most obvious of all, sheer scale of population, geography, and economy. To make a compelling argument for comparative study and his particular methodology, Clark argues that Thailand and China "present like sets of phenomena, from unlike historical contexts, with few endogenous links before the year 2000. If similarities exist, they will focus attention on the endogenous reasons for these, and not because China has followed Thailand, or visa versa ..." (21-22).

Here some explication is needed in terms of how Clark has chosen to articulate his methodology and framework for mapping genealogies of modernity in specific contexts and historical junctures. His introduction goes heavily into methodological explanation, and this is where the reader may find it most challenging to follow Clark's argumentation. In this particular text, Clark has taken a slight departure from the language of semiotics that heavily pervaded *Modern Asian Art* and has now borrowed from scientific terminology to describe how "other" modernities come into being, transform, mutate, hybridize, etc. Such language is characteristic of evolutionary theory, species identification, and genetic models – all of which build on the semiotic structuralist analyses of which Clark is so fond. This time he inserts the language of biological and cultural sign systems to explicate – via scientific models of causation – a tale of two art histories.

This usage of scientific vocabulary in an art historical study is not as objectionable as its potential ramifications for a project that attempts to problematize the standard narrative of progress as embodied in the traditional canon of modern art history.

What makes Clark's methodology and argument tendentious is the repeated usage of terms like "other modernity," endogenous/exogenous, two-way "othering" process, hybridity, evolutionary theory, amongst others: "By admittedly very distant analogy we could interpret modernity as a kind of species adaptation to a situation of a rapid and widely distributed series of relativisations. The question arises as to whether these are to be necessarily seen as adaptive traits of a species-like set of cultural forms, or some initial set of conditions for modernity which then takes specific developmental routes within different cultures" (32). Unfortunately, the reiteration of these terms throughout the text only serves to reinforce the sense that what we are grappling with is another study emphasizing a linear developmental model of modernity, which further concretizes the opposition between the West and the rest. The overuse of such dichotomous categories is detrimental to Clark's objective of attempting to render the term "modernity" more open and inclusive, this being the chief objective of his text. At this point, studies of comparative modernities have come quite far, and it is now generally understood that modernity is often the result of an encounter with an "other" (especially in artistic modernism), and is inherently a "hybrid" phenomenon to begin with. It is a shame that the weight of the semiotic rhetoric and scientific vernacular takes away from the compelling nature of the stories, history, and visual material with which Clark can only briefly engage.

However, one can attribute this cursory engagement and the lack, or near absence, of artists' voices in Clark's account to his chief preoccupation with institutional structures and how they shape artistic change as it is entangled with discourses of modernity and progress. As Clark openly states, "Structures and institutions will be our concern here and not binding narratives

of artistic developments, although these will be included where they facilitate illustration. Our theoretical and empirical goal will be to show that there was another modern art in the geographical and cultural field of the two Asian countries examined" (43). Moreover, his focus on institutions and how they shape artistic communities and flows of discourse is highly pertinent when it comes to the imaging of nation and state, and the particular worldviews – in this case, highly disparate cultural perspectives from Thailand and China – that are informed by these engagements through artistic expression. Here Clark argues for a compelling point of contrast between the two countries and the embeddedness of historical or cultural consciousness in shaping their respective art histories: "Above and beyond the state organs that actually secured hermeneutic hegemony, the basic resemblance between China and Thailand was the presumption of a set of values defining the state and nation" (251).

Clark does make a compelling argument for understanding the distinctive differences between Chinese and Southeast Asian worldviews in terms of state-culture models and how these shape the changing concept of the nation. Artistic production in China has always been imbricated in discourses tied to political ideology and historical conditions, with artists highly engaged in sophisticated discourses along with a strong sense of historical consciousness. A key theme in these discourses was the China/West divide, which would appear to have resulted in more concerted efforts to establish distinctive artistic styles to represent China at global exhibitions and events, the most recognizable style likely being political pop or what Clark refers to as "cynical pop mannerisms" (233). On the other hand, Thailand's historical socio-political trajectory as a semi-feudal, semi-colonial state until the mid-twentieth century resulted in a vary different set of cultural and historical discourses compared to China, especially in its relationship to the West, which was more fraught and ambivalent. The mutually-implicated trio of state, king, and Buddhism has governed a set of universal values in Thailand that also manifested itself in artistic production, with



less of a drive for Thai artists to assert themselves in the global arena of contemporary art: "...the distinguishing feature of many Thai artists was their lack of concern with the artistic conquest of the world or even much overseas recognition. Thai artists simply did not have the historically intense wish for acceptance by the West seen in China" (139).

The great contribution of Clark's text is the degree to which he attempts to investigate the various interfaces between institutional artistic formation and the multiple sources of what he terms 'exogenous' or external influence in the late twentieth

century, a period that can generally be understood as the era of globalization in the contemporary period. He maintains throughout the book that "The distinguishing feature of Chinese and Thai modernity was that the propagation of styles was reinforced by what were in different ways highly controlled and motivated social institutions found in art curricula, art schools and art competitions" (168); this is certainly not a phenomena found throughout contemporary art in Asia, especially elsewhere in Southeast Asia. At the same time, these institutionally-driven artistic styles and movements are rendered problematic by the blurring of categories amongst non-official and official (such as in the activities and affiliations of artist-curators, critics, and writers) in both countries. This emphasis on the role of institutional formation, whether it shaped discourses or practices in the spirit of or against the academic and the official, makes his study an important contribution to studies of Asian modern art history, and helps clarify his project of distinguishing trajectories of modernity (in this case, into the period of the contemporary given his focus on the late twentieth century) in situations disparate from the now standardized Euro-American narratives. In addition, his book is valuable in providing highly detailed and empirical case studies, which will be useful for those interested in undertaking research into modern and contemporary Asian art with the goal of problematizing the essentializing notion of an Asian modernity or modernism. Such studies are necessary in order to bring into further relief the extent to which artistic developments and practices throughout the region are highly variegated and complex, thus enriching our understandings of the modern processes of globalization and contemporaneity, and the formation of global artistic networks.

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