

The new Asia scholar's role in Asian/area studies

Soon after completing my MA in History of Art and Archaeology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, in September 2001, I applied for a doctorate at Columbia, at University of Pennsylvania, and at SOAS, all popular choices to pursue a study on South Asian Temple Architecture. Unfortunately, funding became a major issue after 9/11 and I was unable to secure a full grant. After a few years working as an independent scholar, and curator in Mumbai (working on a Parsi Zoroastrian project),¹ my partner's job transfer brought us to Singapore in 2005.

Priya Maholay-Jaradi



WITH NO JOB or appointment in hand, it seemed like that perfect time to revisit the idea of a doctoral study. My work as a curator had at the time taken me away from *temples*, and towards *collectors* of colonial India, and so I decided to follow this path once again. A proposal on collection studies was drawn out and fortunately accepted at the South Asian Studies Programme, NUS. However, at the time there was no suitable guide for my research plans, and so the proposal was saved to file for the meantime. Since I had to wait for my research programme to start, I began scouting for a job and I eventually went on to serve as curator at the South Asia Gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum, one of Singapore's National Museums. After two years, Dr Andrea Pinkney, a religious studies scholar who completed her doctoral study at Columbia, joined the South Asian Studies Programme at NUS. Given her familiarity with the region, and her focus on religion and anthropology, she was seen as a suitable guide to groom my project on a South Asian collector. A full scholarship further facilitated my candidature.

Regrettably, the first few reading lists drawn out by my new guide, Dr Pinkney, made me quickly question my place in an area studies programme. The topics seemed to be too far removed from my research interests, and I longed for a more art-history based focus, which I surely would have received at, for example, SOAS. After all, how was modernity in Russia, capital in Chicago and the history of foreign relations and trade in South Asia relevant for my study of collectors in colonial India? The Parsi Zoroastrian collectors with whom I had worked closely in Mumbai had discussed (seemingly) more 'relevant' themes: the taste for European style portraiture, commemoration of philanthropists through portrait commissions, portraits in residential spaces and fire temples. Yet the reality was, that only after reading the multi-disciplinary modules, was I able to successfully situate my art historical case study in a wider context. After three whole semesters and several moments of self-doubt, zeroing in on a case-study and its associated archive led to the conviction that an art history-focussed collection studies proposal was finally gaining shape. I was guided in the direction of princely Baroda (present-day Vadodara in Gujarat State), as one of the more progressive and better-administered states during the Raj. It was likely that the records would be comprehensive and relatively well-kept.

Faculty members working on political economy, religious studies and partition histories of South Asia, understood the nature of vast archives in the care of the central and state governments of India and their distinct pedigrees. The recce and final fieldwork in the provincial record room in Vadodara city offered rich data, which could be woven with the histories of modernity, capital, trade, art and even contribute new insights to them, but the facilities do not compare with archives in major metropolitan cities or those housed in well-funded libraries or universities elsewhere in the world, such as the India Office Library Section of the British Library.² I was grateful that examiners' reports lauded my data-collection efforts, being well aware that materials at provincial record rooms are neither as neatly classified nor as available through

Above: Jawaharlal Nehru voting for the motion to ratify partition. Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Govind Ballabh Pant are seen in the background, June 1947. HV Archive/The Alkazi Collection of Photography. Photo by Homai Vyrawalla.

easy keyword searches, as they are in larger libraries or universities. As Barbara Ramusack notes, princely India's archives have been under-studied, yet there is a great rush to theorise its history without sufficient empirical data.³ Lower standards of cataloguing compared to colonial records, discontinuities in correspondence due to scattered locations, inaccessibility to several royal archives/holdings, poor facilities for storage, and absence of digitization, are reasons cited by Ramusack for thin engagement with princely records.⁴ Despite encountering the difficulties listed by Ramusack, the two publications born from my doctoral thesis⁵ highlight fresh archival work and a new case study: a provincial arts centre from South Asia and an Asian collector are located in global narratives of exhibitions, nationalisms, modern and contemporary art production and changing political contours of South Asia.

This autobiographical opening introduces the location of emerging Asia scholars, many of whom take disciplines such as art history (considered the stronghold of European and American academics) to area studies departments in prestigious Asian universities. The benefits of multi-disciplinary mentoring are not restricted to setting the theoretical directions of the work alone, but also ensure engagement with less frequented provincial archives. These mark the beginnings of re-approaching disciplines with new data sets, new themes and protagonists.

Sharing resources

This story of the Asia scholar and Asian archives needs to be read in conjunction with the proliferation of new universities, satellite campuses, museums and university-based art centres in Asia. Yale-NUS opened in 2011 in Singapore with a strong emphasis on a liberal arts education with 'an Asian twist'. Likewise, the satellite campuses spread over Doha, Dubai and Abu Dhabi craft their courses with an Asian focus, and look towards their local resource agencies and an emerging network of satellite museums for fieldwork and activity-based output. The Devi Art Foundation Museum (2008) and Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (2011), India's largest private art collections turned museums in Delhi, have formal or informal partnerships with the School of Arts and Aesthetics at the renowned Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi and with a new university, Shiv Nadar University, respectively. The shared resources between museums and university programmes have led to new pedagogical tools, faculty drawn from diverse backgrounds, and exhibition programmes.⁶ These models have created numerous new entry points to appreciate Asia and to make its story that much richer and intricate.

Several scholars with profiles such as mine, return to teaching positions in academia (read 'area studies departments'). New modules and reading lists are increasingly drawing on a combination of essential readings, new titles published by younger scholars and fieldwork involving local museums and archives. In the case of Singapore, a young two-decade history of national museum projects complements its status as a relatively new and recent nation-state.⁷ Photo and video documentation (of Asian cultures, i.e., festivals,

ritual practices, art and craft production, costumes, people) undertaken from the early 1990s at museums such as the Asian Civilisations Museum⁸ are now gradually becoming part of this new arc of 'scholarship-archives-museum-publications-teaching'. Be it through student projects, lecture slides, or exhibits, more perspectives are coming to bear on area studies. Recently launched boutique projects, such as the Nagore Durgah Indian Muslim Heritage Centre (2015) and India Heritage Centre (2015) in Singapore, include hitherto undocumented stories of young diaspora communities and their cultural objects. Community participation and voices of individuals enjoy a remarkable presence in these projects. The themes and display mechanisms demonstrate a keen understanding of local audiences.⁹ Just as Singapore begins to export home-grown exhibitions to world-class museums across the globe, its scholars and curators are travelling out to universities overseas by availing of scholarships instituted by the government as well as other external agencies.

Linking theory and practice¹⁰

Jackie Yoong (MA History, NUS) curator of the Peranakan Museum, Singapore, is currently pursuing a Masters in History of Art at SOAS on the Alphawood scholarship for Southeast Asian studies. Yoong's thesis contextualizes *nonyaware* (Chinese export porcelain for the Peranakan market of Southeast Asia 1820-1930s; Peranakans being the descendants of overseas traders with Southeast Asian women who developed a hybrid culture) within the wider Qing ceramic tradition, both domestic and export. Given that Peranakan art is a form of cross-cultural art reflecting varied Asian and European influences, its distribution and appreciation has evolved through the years across different geographies. Thus Yoong's position as curator and scholar allows her to include case studies from museum collections in Southeast Asia (Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia) and Europe (UK and Amsterdam). Her recent presentation, as part of the Percival David Foundation ceramic workshops at the British Museum, facilitated sharing of the Peranakan Museum's collection and a simultaneous gathering of information about pieces in Europe. Viewing sessions at the British Museum and the V&A storage provided additional scope to handle good pieces and exchange ideas with curators about their respective collections.¹¹

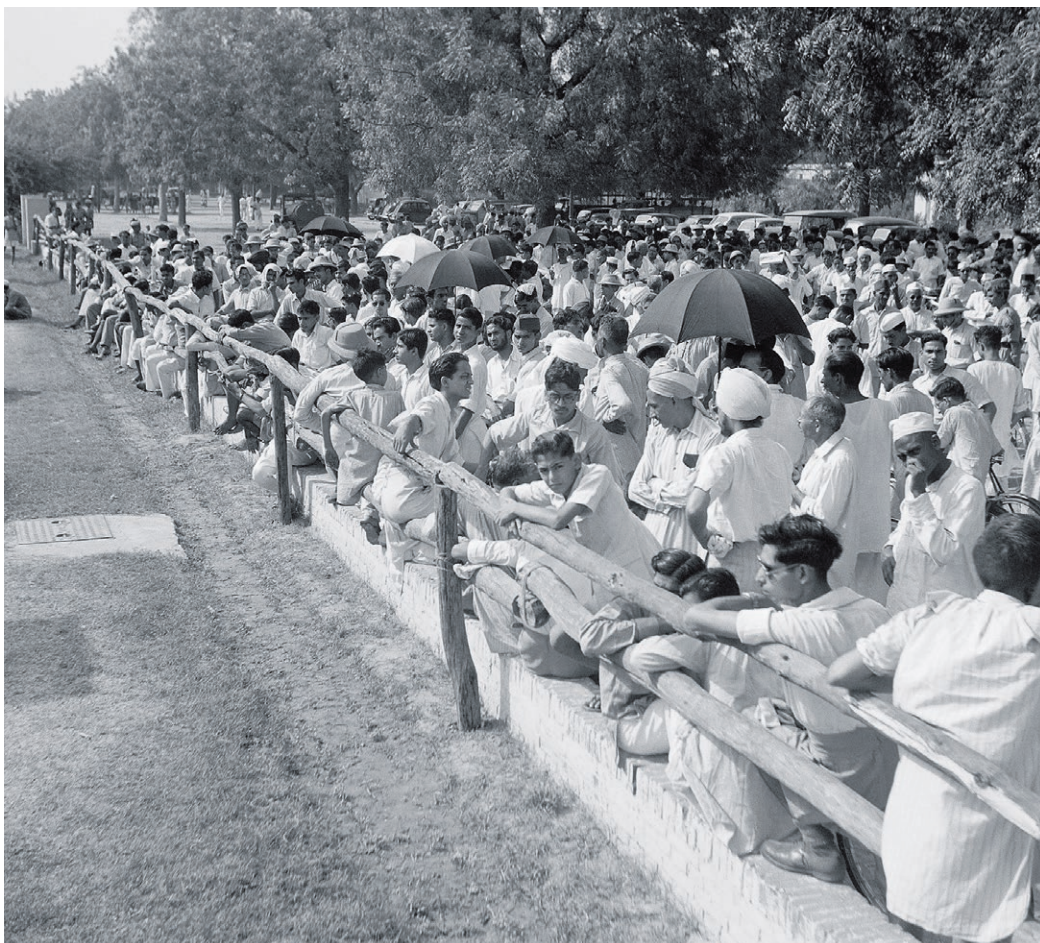
This idea of increasingly re-inscribing the field of Art History, Museum Studies and Collections through Asian content and perspectives, is echoed by Yunci Cai, who was Manager (Policy and Research) at the Strategic Planning and Policy Division of Singapore's National Heritage Board (2005-2013). Cai is currently registered for a PhD in Museum Studies and Cultural Heritage at the UCL Institute of Archaeology (London), focusing on Southeast Asian museology. Her research considers 'Indigenous Agency, Native Curatorship and Cross-cultural Museum Practices in Southeast Asia'; she examines the development of indigenous cultural villages in Malaysia, exploring the politics and poetics of culture as a tool for development and community activism. As she undertakes periodic fieldtrips to Mah Meri Cultural Village in Carey Island, the Orang Seletar

Reining in the museum

Cultural Centre in Johor Bahru (both in West Malaysia), and the Monsopiad Cultural Village and the Linangkit Cultural Village (both in Sabah, East Malaysia), Cai observes, “Previously inaccessible to Western scholars, perhaps due to political, cultural and communication barriers, the presence of more Asian scholars and heritage professionals in Western academia that are conversant in English and their native languages, as well as competent in different knowledge systems and philosophical thoughts, can foster friction and fusion of different philosophies and viewpoints, leading to the cross-fertilization of ideas and creation of new knowledge.”¹²

Cai’s work, based on reviewing the strategic focus of the National Heritage Board’s heritage establishments and drafting collection-related policies for National Museums, allows her to attest how Asian scholars and heritage professionals offer alternative ways of seeing and thinking about issues based on the philosophies and practices in Southeast Asia. In the field of museology, for example, while the origin of the museum institution has been widely traced to the 14th century evolution of great public museums of the Renaissance period in Europe, there have been parallel developments in Southeast Asia where heirlooms and treasures are collected in families, monasteries and temples, which are preserved and handed down through generations. Similarly, there exist many indigenous methods of looking at museum objects as well as caring for and preserving museum objects that are unique to Southeast Asia. Cai elaborates, “For example, museum objects in Southeast Asia are often acknowledged to embody spirits and supernatural powers that need to be appeased and purified before their acquisition into the museum collection, and their subsequent use in museum exhibitions, which have impacts on the museum’s collection management policies. Museums in Southeast Asia have also adopted traditional methods using traditional herbs and spices to care for museum collections, which are more appropriate to the local contexts in terms of the climatic conditions and resource availability.”¹³

Below: Crowds waiting outside the venue of the Congress Committee meeting for the news on partition, June 1947. HV Archive/The Alkazi Collection of Photography. Photo by Homai Vyarawalla.



Cai sheds light on the ability to link museum theory with practice; she sees much value in enabling academic research on museums to be made socially relevant to local communities (since the *sine non quo* of a museum is to be socially relevant to its communities): “Several interchanges are becoming more pertinent in an academic climate where researchers are increasingly encouraged to demonstrate the social impact of their research”.

Rapidly proliferating resources

Today, increasingly shared spaces between academia, museums, archives and related projects, promote the view that different perspectives grounded in diverse knowledge systems and philosophical thoughts will likely have wider political, economic, social and cultural implications to the world we live in.¹⁴ Just as plural disciplines in area studies departments groom an art history project, so also do visual materials aggrandize narratives and arguments within other disciplines. A recent talk delivered at the Institute for South Asian Studies (ISAS; Singapore), by Sabeena Gadihoke (Associate Professor of Video Production, at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi) was accompanied by powerful visuals of the run-up to India’s partition and the decade following independence.¹⁵ The images came from the personal archives of India’s first (female) press photographer, the late Homai Vyarawalla (1913-2012) and thus also shed light on her practice. Now in the care of the ACP Archives New Delhi, these pictures have formed the subject matter of Gadihoke’s research, publications and curatorial projects.

As physical holdings of pictures and documents are digitized, they become decontextualized from their original locations, trunks and catalogues, thus finding a new virtual habitat. Consequently, they provide an altogether different vantage point, as observed by Gadihoke. Much like Vyarawalla’s collection digitized by the ACP Archives, several modern and contemporary Asian artists’ documents, diaries and correspondences form the bulk of materials at the Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong. Schematic online catalogues afford condensed overviews of heterogeneous materials; they serve as a resource for research and also guide the making of new research proposals. The condensed online view of the archive allows one to connect some very disparate records, materials and themes. Thus, a single ‘screen shot’, often overwhelming due to its underlying content, drives home the point that the new Asia scholar has a vast offering of physical and virtual spaces: archives, record rooms, digitized catalogues, museums and universities. Engagement with these rapidly proliferating resources can simultaneously rein in older materials, recent histories and living cultures, thereby making Asian/Area studies relevant to the contemporary world.

Several disputes and challenges of the Asian world, such as continuing subordination of women, religious intolerance, cross-border terrorism and conflict zones, require a more nuanced understanding of people, cultures and worldviews from within. For instance, shared religious practices were part of South Asian civilisations and their cultures.¹⁶ Until the nineteenth century British census undertakings, people did not necessarily have to classify

themselves along religious categories; cultural concepts did not translate into fixed numbers and appellations.¹⁷ If alone, the plurality and inter-religiosity of Asian civilizations can be comprehended and made part of popular imagination, the contemporary world can avoid episodes such as the razing of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya (India) and the Buddhas of the Bamiyan valley in Afghanistan. Even a quick look at Homai Vyarawalla’s photographs of a pre-partition meeting held in Delhi will tell us of the miniscule numbers who made an irreversible decision of drawing up political boundaries (on the basis of majority and minority numbers of religious groups), to decide the fate of culturally-linked multitudes. Pictures, such as those shot by Vyarawalla, will have to be engaged in conjunction with scholarly undertakings at universities and academies, to encourage more nuanced readings of Asia and bring these effectively into popular spheres of consumption, be they textual, pictorial, pedagogic or exhibitionary.

Priya Maholay-Jaradi is a former curator at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, and currently a part-time lecturer at the National University of Singapore. Her most recent publication is *Baroda: A Cosmopolitan Provenance in Transition*, Mumbai: Marg Publications (2015).

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- 1 ‘Portrait of a Community: Photographs and Paintings of the Parsis’, an exhibition held at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, 2002.
- 2 Discussions with examiners, February-June 2012: Frederick Asher, Saranindranath Tagore and Kavita Singh.
- 3 Ramusack, B.N. 2004. *The New Cambridge History of India: The Indian Princes and Their States*, Volume III(6), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.10.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Jaradi, P.M. 2011. *Fashioning India’s National Art: Baroda’s Royal Collection, Art Institutions and Crafts at Colonial Exhibitions (1875-1924)*. Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, South Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore.
- 6 *Where in the World* (2008), an exhibition project between the Devi Art Foundation, and students and faculty of the School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU (Delhi), is an example of such a partnership.
- 7 Ting, K. ‘Museums in Singapore: A Short History’, *MUSE SG* 8(30):18-25, National Heritage Board Singapore.
- 8 The ACMRL is a resource pool of video, audio and photo documentation, initiated in the early 1990s, by founding curators at the Asian Civilisations Museum.
- 9 The last five years have seen museums in Singapore become a part of popular imagination and part of to-do weekend lists.
- 10 The author will like to thank Jackie Yoong and Yunci Cai for sharing their insights on the subject.
- 11 Interviews with Jackie Yoong, August-September 2015.
- 12 Interview with Yunci Cai, August-September 2015.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 ‘The Many Lives of Homai Vyarawalla: Revisiting a Historical Archive’, 14 July 2015, Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore.
- 16 Davis, R. ‘Introduction: A Brief History of Religions in India’, in Lopez, D.J. 1995. *Religions of India in Practice*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 3-12; 14-21; 44-48; Madan, T.N. ‘Introduction: India’s Religions: Plurality and Pluralism’, in T.N. Madan (ed.) *India’s Religions: Perspectives from Sociology and History*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp.1-35.
- 17 Harjot, O. 1994. ‘Introduction’, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, University of Chicago Press, pp. 1-18.

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THERE’S BEEN A DRAMATIC growth in attention to manuscript studies during the last twenty years or so. New critical editions of Sanskrit texts are more common today than in the past, especially facilitated by the latest computer tools for typesetting coupled with digital imagery. This has also led to the emergence of a new group of highly talented younger scholars who are excellent in languages and in the skills of textual criticism and interpretation. I think a new area ripe for growth is translation studies as applied to ancient and medieval Indian languages.

Dominik Wujastyk, University of Alberta,
wujastyk@ualberta.ca

I HAVE ALWAYS FOUND water tight compartmentalisation and artificial boundaries between different disciplines stifling the evolution of human advancement in the area of research. I admit that for practical purposes and for the sake of formal education some amount of division is required but what does a scholar like me do, when after having done a Ph.D. in Life Sciences I develop a deep interest in the Humanities? University regulations in India, and I am sure in many other countries, do not allow students to pursue a Ph.D. in humanities if they do not have a graduate and post-graduate degree in the same discipline. I am sure that this problem is faced by many other scholars. Perhaps it is time to bring about some flexibility in regulations related to higher education and research. Secondly there is at the moment a kind of caste-distinction between research papers produced by ‘established mainstream’ scholars with a list of degrees and papers behind them and the ‘non-conventional’ scholars who may have crossed over from a different field and may not be affiliated to well established departments in their new field of interest. The quality of research produced should be judged in isolation from the academic background or affiliation of the research scholar. Such scholars are also at a major disadvantage when it comes to getting research fellowships or publishing papers or books in their new area of research. In my opinion there should be some international universities and research institutes which allow deserving Asian scholars who want to change over into another discipline, some age concession and flexibility that would facilitate them to pursue research, apply for fellowships and publish papers in reputed journals. As an end note I would like to mention that often times the cross-over scholar can bring a refreshingly new perspective to the table due to her different and varied background.

Rupa Abdi, independent researcher, abdi_rupa@yahoo.co.in

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