

# The Newsletter



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Reflections  
from Surabaya



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## In this edition of The Focus

# Manila: Heritage, Memory, Nationhood

Ian Morley

The Philippines has a distinctive historical status in that the character of local society before 1946 – when national independence was granted – was influenced by imperial occupations by Spain, Japan, and the United States. In helping to (re)shape the urban environments in which Filipinos lived, and the culture by which the native population undertook daily activities, colonisation by foreign powers led to the establishment of public spaces and the construction of monuments which remain critical to the present-day grasp of what it means to be Filipino. Colonial-era public spaces and monuments thus still inform, in the postcolonial setting, Filipinos’ understanding of collective memory. In this edition of *The Focus*, Ian Morley, Mar Ticao, and Claudia Montero provide an overview of such colonial-era spaces and monuments. Through articles on diverse topics – from WWII and the Japanese occupation of the Philippines to the American colonial-era statues commemorating José Rizal, from the under-studied Filipino architect Antonio Toledo to a broader discussion of the politics of remembrance and commemoration – the collection underscores how such architectures and memorials shaped past identity and, indeed, how they have been used to further reinforce what it is to be ‘Filipino’ in the postcolonial setting.



Left: Luneta Park in present-day Manila.

**The International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) is a global Humanities and Social Sciences institute and a knowledge exchange platform, based in Leiden, the Netherlands, with programmes that engage Asian and other international partners. IIAS takes a thematic and multisectoral approach to the study of Asia and actively involves scholars and experts from different disciplines and regions in its activities. Our current thematic research clusters are Asian Heritages, Asian Cities, and Global Asia.**

Information about the programmes and activities of IIAS can be found in The Network pages of each issue of *The Newsletter*.

**On The Network pages**

On page 51, Michael Herzfeld and Rita Padawangi reflect on the publication of their new volume *Resilience as Heritage in Asia*, which they co-edited for IIAS’ “Asian Heritages” series at Amsterdam University Press. The following spread (page 52-53) is devoted to the IIAS Fellowship Programme. First, Laura Erber discusses recent changes to the fellowship as well as new institutional partnerships with the International Institute of Social History, Framer Framed, and the Käte Hamburger Center for Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Studies (CAPAS) at Heidelberg University (page 52). Second, we introduce our cohort of new fellows and highlight upcoming fellowship opportunities (page 53). Finally, pages 54-55 offer the usual snapshot of ongoing research projects and academic networks at IIAS.



Above: New fellows at IIAS (see page 53)

The Newsletter is a free periodical published by IIAS. As well as being a window into the Institute, The Newsletter also links IIAS with the community of Asia scholars and the worldwide public interested in Asia and Asian studies. The Newsletter bridges the gap between specialist knowledge and public discourse, and continues to serve as a forum for scholars to share research, commentary and opinion with colleagues in academia and beyond.

Postal address  
PO Box 9500  
2300 RA Leiden  
The Netherlands

Visitors  
Herta Mohr Building  
Witte Singel 27A  
2311 BG Leiden  
T +31 (0) 71-527 2227  
[iias@iias.nl](mailto:iias@iias.nl)

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Chief editor:  
Paramita Paul

Assistant editor:  
Benjamin Linder

Guest editor for The Focus:  
Ian Morley

Editors for The Region:  
Besnik Aliaj and Anila Bejko (Gjika)  
(Tirana, Albania)  
Edwin Jurriëns and Cathy Harper  
(Australia and the Pacific)  
Norshahril Saat (ISEAS)  
ZHAO Jinchao (China Connections)

Editor for The Network:  
Sandra Dehue

Digital editor:  
Thomas Voorter

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Paul Oram  
Lava

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Submission enquiries  
[thenewsletter@iias.nl](mailto:thenewsletter@iias.nl)  
More information:  
[iias.asia/the-newsletter](http://iias.asia/the-newsletter)

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[iias.asia](http://iias.asia)

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# After Surabaya

Philippe Peycam



**T**he dust has now settled after the considerable event of the 13th edition of ICAS in Surabaya, the first held in person after COVID, and the first organized as a Conference-Festival or “ConFest.” From accounts of all the people I talked to, and in my own judgement, I can say that it was an unprecedented success.

Given the scale and complexity of the event – both a conference and a festival intricately woven into the fabric of the city – it is of course difficult to draw hasty conclusions, especially from the perspective of one of the two main co-organizers, without yet having an opportunity to discuss the matter among our colleagues within IIAS, within AIIOC-UNAIR, our main local partners, and between our two organizations. All I can say at this stage is that ICAS Surabaya 2024 marked an important moment in the process of internationalization of Indonesia’s humanistic, academic, inter-cultural scholarship, and in the process of decentering knowledge generation and exchanges away from the more traditional ‘centers’ of Jakarta and Yogyakarta.

It was also an event in which a major city, Surabaya, displayed the full body of its human and cultural resources, from the engagement of its civil society and communities to the depth of its history, along with its modern infrastructures, as the maritime gateway to Eastern Indonesia. The country, no doubt, is undergoing major transformations as far as its academic and cultural landscapes are concerned, and these are developments that reflect its newly assertive position in the global economic and geopolitical landscape. It was telling that the de facto Minister of Culture, the historian HE Hilmar Farid, chose to spend two full days of his busy schedule participating in numerous discussions held at the ConFest, and to have his ministry actively support the whole event.

The diversity of participants, in terms of their academic and cultural backgrounds, was also unprecedented. More than 80 nationalities were represented and, within Indonesia, participants from every corner of the archipelagic nation joined. The 10 broad thematic clusters, articulated in both global and local terms, also fostered a remarkable array of perspectives. They made sure that the event, however global and pan-Asian it was, was also in dialogue with the Eastern Javanese and Indonesian experiences.

There were also the numerous exhibitions, in-situ workshops, public displays, and performances scattered across the city’s historical center, intellectual and creative gestures no longer separated from the social fabric. All such events enchanted many discussions throughout the ConFest.

I, for instance, attended an in-situ public roundtable on “The Chinese of Surabaya” held in the community’s Ancestors Hall, located in the old Chinese quarter, an area free from commodification, in the heart of the old town. The experience was magical because the live testimonies that were shared with the public, and the discussions they triggered, were endowed with a unique resonance by occurring in this beautiful, solemn, yet also intimate space. That was just one in-situ event of the ConFest among many, many others.

My colleagues will present in this issue a more detailed account of what can be drawn from the ICAS Surabaya experience (see pp. 42-49). What I want to try here is to reflect on the impact we can begin to draw for IIAS.

First, one reflection that immediately emerged from the ICAS Surabaya experience has to do with the contrast that continues to exist between the actual capacities and organizational setting of IIAS as a middle-size institute and the magnitude of an event like ICAS. I also want to return to IIAS’ multi-functional approach, and how it could set a new structural, programmatic laboratory for advancing internationalization strategies.

What is clear is how the ICAS Surabaya ConFest was endowed with a multi-leveled, transformative, accelerating capacity that has affected many partners: it helped in the strategic (re-)positioning of Airlangga University, at the national and international levels, but also vis-à-vis its surrounding communities; it exerted influence in the way the city’s municipality engaged with the revitalization of its historical zones, in the recognition of the local artist-activists and their capacity to impact positively on both the city and the university; and it helped in the way new intellectual trends and networks, new epistemologies, can be developed, beyond geographies or disciplinary boundaries.

This multifaceted transformative aspect of ICAS could be implemented largely thanks to the mobilization of IIAS’ pluri-functional capacities, and thanks to the institute’s ability to leverage innovative dynamics in

Fig.1: ICAS 13 banner in Surabaya, 2024.

collaboration with both larger and local partners, adapting to diverse working styles and cultures.

This was quite a remarkable feat, not only for the accumulated logistical and organizational experience built on 12 previous ICAS events, but also because of the dedicated involvement of the institute’s team to innovate on multiple aspects of the program, from the definition of activities and new formats to their final implementation.

Moreover, while from the outside the Surabaya ConFest may have appeared to be just a few days’ event, the whole exercise, from its inception to its conclusion actually transcends that limited timeline. It has paved the way for numerous long-lasting initiatives and has acted as a catalyst for new partnerships, serving as a crucial meeting point for new collaborative networks to take shape. Additionally, the preparation process presented an opportunity for Airlangga University to effectively engage in a collaborative work process: beyond its campus, with local communities and artists; beyond its regional and national frameworks; beyond its traditional operational boundaries.

The process of transformation of ICAS from an academic conference to an academic-civic-artistic ConFest thus allowed us to innovate in seeking to bridge different people and institutional actors, with their distinct backgrounds and ranges of intervention, thereby embracing more sectors of knowledge, more knowledge ecosystems.

The ConFest certainly benefited from IIAS’s diverse portfolio of engagements, itself built on the institute’s different priorities. It was them, along with many others, that helped lift the event both in its scale and its capacity to deliver a uniquely meaningful and innovative space of exchange, one in which a number of micro-events – long planned and developed by colleagues together with their Indonesian and international partners – brought in groundbreaking new contributions and connections.

I could list the projects presented under the Humanities Across Borders (HAB) initiative or those under IIAS’ Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA), or again, those activities framed within our new South-South-North platform. I was involved in one of them entitled “Inclusive Southeast Asia” that sought to bring together representatives of ‘remote’ or ‘marginal’ institutions of the region, from Aceh to the Moluccas, from West Papua to Laos, from Timor Leste to forced-exiled Myanmar. Interestingly enough, this session attracted participants from Africa and Latin America as well. A similar type of intricate, new form of interaction occurred when a Nigerian artist worked alongside their Chinese and Indonesian counterparts, artists and academics, to improvise joint performances and plan future collaborations.

In the end, this diversity in perspectives, along with the aim to integrate research, education, dissemination, and archiving, brings me back to a point I have emphasized in previous Notes: the strength of IIAS’ multifunctional approach. Combined with discussions on the institute’s organizational structure and scale, this multi-faceted platform-structure can offer new opportunities for an innovative university-wide strategy in international collaboration and profile building.

One of IIAS’ current ambitions is to expand some of its innovative programs, such as the ConFest model, beyond their initial limited geographic focus on Asia. By doing so, we aim to support our university of affiliation, Leiden University, and the broader Leiden-Delft-Erasmus collaborative platform, in developing groundbreaking activities that could strengthen their engagement as local-global knowledge and civic actors.

Philippe Peycam is Director at IIAS.  
Email: [p.m.f.peycam@iias.nl](mailto:p.m.f.peycam@iias.nl)



## ICAS 13

The 13th edition of the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) took place in Surabaya, Indonesia from July 28-August 1, 2024. Welcoming more than 1500 participants from over 60 countries around the world, ICAS 13 reimagined scholarly exchange through its Conference-Festival (ConFest) model. In addition to panels and roundtables, the gathering included a variety of nontraditional modes of academic, artistic, and civic engagement – from film screenings, public exhibitions, and festival nights to urban sketch walks, *kampung* visits, and in-situ workshops. For more images of ICAS 13, along with reflections by some of the ConFest's organizers and volunteers, please see pp. 42-49 of this issue.



# The International Conference-Festival (ConFest) 'Africa-Asia, A New Axis of Knowledge 3'

3rd Edition, Dakar, Senegal  
11-14 June 2025

Organized by Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD)  
Collective Africa-Southeast Asia Platform (CASAP)  
and International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS)

Further Information: [iias.asia/aa3](https://iias.asia/aa3)

## Call for Proposals Extended deadline: 25 October 2024

Building on the multiple encounters, interactions and dialogues initiated at the first Africa-Asia Conference (Accra, Ghana, 2015) and the second Africa-Asia Conference (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 2018), this third edition of the 'Africa-Asia, A New Axis of Knowledge' event seeks to deepen the explorations of new realities and long histories connecting Africa and Asia.

The collaborative mission of Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD, Dakar, Senegal), Collective Africa-Southeast Asia Platform

(CASAP, Bangkok, Thailand) and the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS, Leiden, The Netherlands) aims to stimulate inquiry into the rich resources offered by the city of Dakar and its surroundings. In this way, the city itself enables the materialisation of an experiential Conference-Festival (ConFest) that celebrates diversity within academia, but that also extends beyond academia into civil society and the arts.

Over the course of four days in Dakar, participants will be encouraged to think both comparatively and holistically about the challenges and possibilities of cross-continental and trans-regional encounters.

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# 8th Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network

Negotiating Asian Borders: Actors,  
Displacements, Multiplicities, Sovereignties

Yarmouk University, Jordan  
2-4 September 2025

Call for Papers  
Deadline: 1 November 2024

## Call for Papers

The multiple crises facing our world today warrant critical reflection on how we think of bordering, sovereignty, belonging, and solidarity. Today, borders are transforming in multiple ways as communities, technologies, infrastructures, and natural forces interact, blending physical and virtual boundaries together. Borders are negotiated through new practices, on the ground and "in the cloud", with profound implications on our understanding of actors, displacements, multiplicities, and sovereignties. The tactics people use to navigate contemporary borders, the historical linkages and narratives of borders, and alternative visions of borders and borderlands are all important parts of these transformations. How people navigate and make sense of these turbulent times remains a key question to be answered. Tracing historical linkages and dynamics can unveil diverse narratives on borders and sovereignty, inviting voices, memories, and imaginaries towards alternative visions of the present and future.

The theme of the 8th ABRN conference is "Negotiating Asian Borders." The four sub-themes – Actors, Displacements, Multiplicities, Sovereignties – offer specific points of engagement, with broader



possibilities of cross-fertilisation of ideas and research directions. For a more detailed description of conference themes, visit <https://www.iias.asia/events/negotiating-asian-borders>.

We invite conceptually innovative papers, based on fresh research, in order to develop new perspectives in the study of borderlands in Asia and its broader geographical reach, especially connections to other world regions and continents. Submissions are invited from scholars, writers, policy studies researchers, artists, filmmakers, activists, and journalists, among others.

Only a small number of individual papers will be selected. We therefore encourage you to submit a full panel proposal. We will consider proposals for panels and roundtables that have a thematic focus, are of a comparative character, and involve scholars or practitioners affiliated with different institutions.

The deadline to send in panel, roundtable, and paper proposals is 1 November 2024.

Please visit <https://www.iias.asia/events/negotiating-asian-borders> to submit proposals. Participants will be notified in March 2025.

Above:  
Umm Qais, Jordan.  
(Photo by Ruba Al Akash, Director of Refugee Displaced Persons and Forced Migration Studies Centre Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan)





Fig. 1a (left) and 1b (right): The change in perception of Jōmon complexity over time. 1a is the first collaboration between Sahoko Aki and Shūzō Koyama in 1986; 1b the re-issue in 2003. (Paintings by Sahoko Aki, in *The Asahi Encyclopaedia of Japanese History*)

# Reconstructing Relationships between Heritage Sites and Present-Day Communities through “Art and Archaeology”

Sahoko AKI and Ilona BAUSCH

Archaeological and cultural heritage can play an integral role in community-building, provided that outreach is socially inclusive. Reconstructions must represent diverse perspectives, and this is where collaborations between artists and scholars can provide extra value. Artist Sahoko Aki, who has made countless archaeological reconstruction illustrations,<sup>1</sup> and archaeologist Ilona Bausch,<sup>2</sup> share a passion for Japanese archaeological heritage. They are involved in “Art and Archaeology” projects in Japan,<sup>3</sup> where a team of archaeologists and artists collaborate with local communities and heritage specialists to engage in new ways with their cultural heritage, and try to include people who were not previously involved. In what follows, Bausch interviews Aki about such ongoing work, exploring themes of heritage, archaeological representation, artistic reproduction, and the importance of making participation in heritage as accessible and inclusive as possible, for example including local residents, people with disabilities, and children.

## Reconstructing Jōmon

**Ilona Bausch (IB):** The prehistoric Jōmon period in Japan (c. 14,000–500 BCE),<sup>4</sup> a complex culture of hunter-gatherers who also practiced horticulture, plays a central role in our work. Nowadays, the Sannai-Maruyama site in Aomori [Figs. 2–3] is one of the most famous archaeological sites in Japan, and part of the UNESCO World Heritage “Jōmon prehistoric sites in Northern Japan.”<sup>5</sup> However, before its discovery in 1995 (and its vigorous promotion in the Japanese media!), there was not so much public interest in the Jōmon period, except among archaeologists. As an artist, were you always interested in archaeology? How did you become involved in archaeological reconstructions?

**Sahoko Aki (SA):** Originally, I had no intention to concentrate on archaeological reconstructions at all, until 1985 when I met Shūzō KOYAMA (1930–2022). As an archaeologist and cultural anthropologist

at the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, he wanted to demonstrate that Jōmon culture was far more complex than what other researchers in Japan considered at that time, so he was searching for an artist who could visualise his ideas about this Japanese stone age hunter-gatherer culture. Koyama was a researcher of indigenous cultures, who had carried out fieldwork among contemporary hunter-gatherers such as Australian Aboriginals. He introduced me to archaeological artefacts such as a Jōmon clay earspool decorated with red lacquer [shown in the illustrations Fig. 1a and Fig. 1b], and its sophisticated design really drew me in. Our fieldwork interpreting archaeological artefacts in contemporary Japan inspired me to draw scenes from prehistoric people’s everyday life. My first published collaboration with Koyama “Family life of the Jōmon” [Fig. 1a] was published in 1986, and when the same magazine re-published this issue 18 years later in 2003, Koyama and I changed the cover, to represent the Jōmon people as more elaborately dressed [Fig. 1b].

**IB:** How have the insights and reconstructions changed over time, with the increasing public interest in prehistoric culture, and with changing socio-economic conditions?

**SA:** Archaeological research focus and its reconstruction images tend to reflect the interest of society at any given time. Thanks to the land development during the Bubble Economy boom in Japan in the 1980s, the researchers and the public alike were excited by the archaeological discoveries of spectacular large-scale settlements, with large prosperous populations, and increasing cultural and social complexity. For example, this can be seen in my commissioned reconstructions for the Sannai-Maruyama site in Aomori [Figs. 2–3] in the 1990s. The mural in Figure 2 represents an overview of the site. For Figure 3, I was asked to show the large population. This picture does not represent the everyday life or population size at Sannai-Maruyama, but a special festival where a large crowd is gathering together for a euphoric celebration.

But in the past 30 years, society’s interest and focus have changed globally. This also influences archaeological interpretations. Due to growing concerns about climate change and environmental disaster in Japan, the focus has shifted to representing small-scale settlements that coexist in harmony with nature. An example of this is Figure 4: the reconstruction of the Fudōdō site, a coastal Jōmon settlement in Asahi, Toyama prefecture from 5000 years ago, which is contemporary to the Sannai-Maruyama site. The contrast is very clear: the focus is on the environment. Even recent reconstructions of Sannai-Maruyama reflect this emphasis on surrounding landscape.

## Collaborating with scholars

**IB:** You explained that your commissioned reconstructions strongly reflect the interpretations of the archaeologists whom you work with. What is your work process,



Fig. 2 (above): Reconstruction of an overview of the large-scale Sannai-Maruyama settlement made for the special exhibition organized by Aomori prefecture, NHK, and Asahi newspaper titled "JOMON World '96." (Painting and photo by Sahoko Aki, 1996)



Fig. 3 (above): Reconstruction of a festival at the Sannai-Maruyama site. (Painting by Sahoko Aki, in collaboration with S. Koyama, 1996. Published in *Quarterly Magazine Obayashi* No. 42.)



Fig. 4 (right): A reconstruction of the Fudōdō site in Toyama, from 2017. Currently, the sustainable relationship between humans and nature is at the forefront of perceptions of prehistoric life. (Painting by Sahoko Aki, 2017. Commissioned by Executive Committee of the Project to Rediscover the National Historic Site of Fudōdō)

how do you create your illustrations in collaboration with archaeologists and other scholars?

**SA:** Usually, the researchers first invite me to the excavation site, to explain their own vision based on discovered evidence and data. Visiting the site is essential to understand the reason why the Jōmon people chose to settle at that place. To some extent, the site links horizontally with the modern landscape, because landscape features such as mountains, forests, rivers, and seas that were part of the ancient landscape still exist, especially in rural areas. Importantly, present-day local people are still relating to, and using, this landscape. By being there, you feel a strong connection to both the ancient population and lifestyle, as well as to the present one.

In order to create the Fudōdō landscape reconstruction shown in Figure 4, the entire process took over three months. Figures 5a-c show my various steps of conceptualising the reconstruction, based on the information

I received from the local scholars. For this reconstruction, the main focus was the settlement within the wider landscape, and the way that Jōmon people used their natural environment. In this case, the archaeologist Noriko KAWABATA, curator at the Archaeology and Folklore Museum in Asahimachi, Toyama prefecture, studied the tiny imprints that plant seeds left behind in clay pots after the pots were fired. Such data allow the reconstruction of the flora and the cultivated plants in or nearby the settlement. The geoscientist Takashi KUBO provided me with images of the wider landscape at the background of the site, based on his geological research. In this way, I received information on both the micro- and macro-scale. Working with geologists has given me a much wider perspective for my reconstructions.

**IB:** That reminds me of our first meeting at the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN) in Kyoto, as members of the interdisciplinary project "Neolithisation

and Modernisation: Landscape History on East Asian Inland Seas" (NEOMAP).<sup>6</sup> I asked you to draw an illustration of a shamaness wearing jade ornaments for my research on prehistoric jade objects, and that was the start of our own long-term collaboration.

**SA:** Yes, I remember! I was stimulated by your idea that jade was not just used as commodity for economic exchange or for simple accessories, but also as amulets for spiritual protection of Jōmon people, their families, and their communities. Female archaeologists like you and Kawabata bring a different, more social-oriented archaeological perspective. In fact, I am inspired by all my encounters and collaborations with scholars, artists, and local communities. For example, the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) is concerned with the role of heritage in society. My activities with WAC gave me the invaluable insight that contemporary archaeology must also make an impact on present-day society.

## Artistic perceptions and the importance of listening to diverse voices

**IB:** As an artist, you have a very different perspective from archaeologists or other scholars. In your opinion, why are collaborations between art and archaeology so important? What important insights can artists contribute?

**SA:** I see myself as being in the position of "interpreter" between archaeology and the public. First, where researchers are fact-based and logical, artists usually have a very different way of perception and expression. Artists have finely tuned intuitions, a kind of 'antenna' for understanding the contemporary societal issues and the transforming atmosphere of the era. Second, they also have a strong understanding of physicality, and of making sense of the world through the five senses, not just sight or words. Third, they are able to express these impressions



Fig. 5a (left), 5b (right), and 5c (below): Several stages in conceptualising the reconstruction of the Fudōdō site in Figure 4, based on information from an archaeologist and a geologist. (Sketches by Sahoko Aki, 2017)

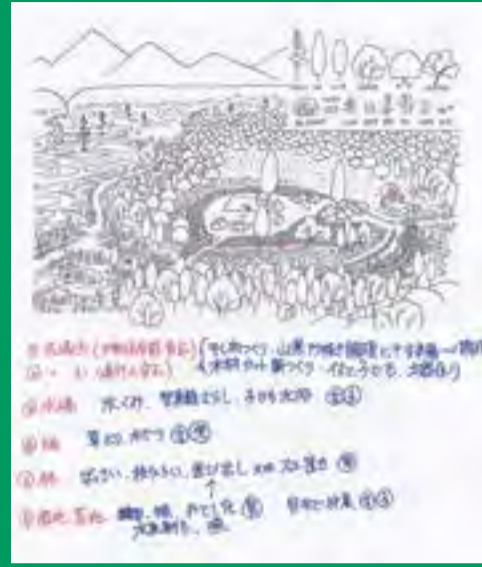


Fig. 6a (above): Children from Osaka International School of Kwanseigakuin on an excursion to the Fudōdō site in Toyama, exploring the environment including potential clay sources. (Photo by Sahoko Aki, 2018)

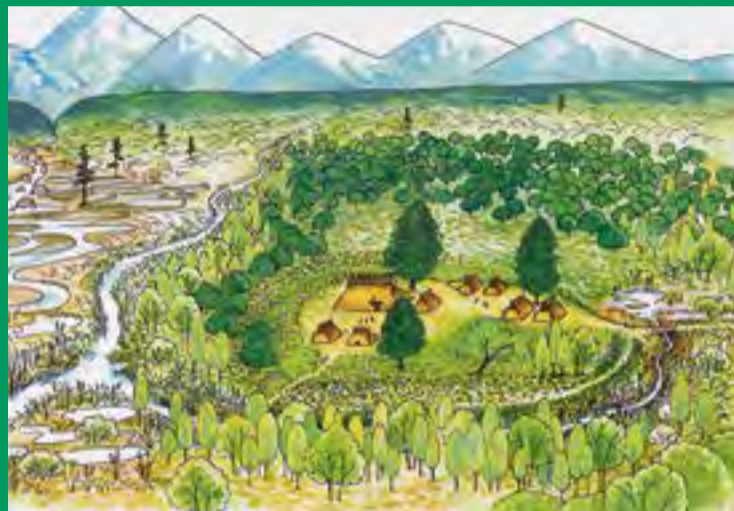


Fig. 6b (below): At Osaka International School of Kwanseigakuin, Aki (brown jumper) and the students design the clay layers of a 21st-century archaeological site, inserting items that 23rd-century archaeologists might find: lots of plastic. (Photo by Jennifer Henbest Calvillo, 2021)

through art. Art is action! Moreover, art does not require an absolute answer, which is important to reflect the diversity of the people's perspectives in modern society. I think diversity is important in making reconstructions, because over thirty years I have witnessed how diverse not only academic arguments but also different social interests and impressions are, and how they change over time. Archaeological reconstructions – especially for prehistoric eras with limited information available – have to be built depending on whose image or interpretation it is. It reflects different views; it cannot be just one absolute “truth”. Unlike many archaeologists, I have come to think that present-day people can enjoy some freedom in their own image of the past, based on their own experience or impression, and artists have their own unique vision and ‘antenna’.

Art and archaeology collaborative projects can turn this freedom into a benefit for both archaeology and the present public. The sensitive contemporary expression generated by close collaboration between archaeologists and artists can assist in bridging the gaps, between not only academics and the public, but also between different communities, like different generations, cultural backgrounds, etc.

**IB:** Why is it so important to involve local people in heritage projects?

**SA:** Diversity of people's impressions and experiences is very important. That is why I also work with and listen to diverse groups, such as local residents, children, and people with impairments. The formation of the archaeological site landscape is continuous from thousands of years ago to now. I think it is important to listen carefully to the individual memories and experiences of contemporary people, and then to incorporate these in the reconstructions if relevant. Histories are usually recorded by authorities, but many of the archaeological artefacts represent the lives of unknown ordinary people. If archaeological site management and reconstruction is only done by archaeologists, you'd lack the diverse perspectives of the lived experiences of present local residents. They often have lived and worked in this environment and landscape for many generations. Their experiences quite likely contain some aspects taken over from their local

ancestors. These real physical experiences make reconstructions vivid; you cannot get such insights from museum visits.

### Sharing inspiration with children

**IB:** You have also been teaching arts and crafts to children, mostly ranging from kindergarten to primary school (roughly four to ten years old). Why, in your opinion, is art education so essential in society today? And how have your interactions with children influenced your ideas?

**SA:** Globally, today's societies have so many problems caused by “difference.” Gaps of politics, culture, region, nation, generation, gender, and social class are becoming so complex. I believe one essential role of art is helping different communities in the process of finding a way to encounter each other and start bridging these gaps. For example, Osaka International School of Kwanseigakuin (Minoh city, Osaka prefecture), which has students from diverse backgrounds, annually invite me to teach about archaeology or cultural heritages. In contrast to many Japanese schools (which must conform to government-based annual schedules, edging art education out of the “essential studies”), their curriculum has a “social art” programme, giving their students extraordinary opportunity to be inspired by current global social and scientific problems and express them in their artwork. This approach is more meaningful for understanding the social role of art. Furthermore, it stimulates

children's individual creativity and imagination, which is very important for developing their cognitive and expressive skills, critical thinking, and confidence.

We have also been using art and archaeology workshops to make heritage accessible and understandable to children. Children have a naturally high energy and curiosity. Especially for urban children, there is a strong need to go outside and physically experience the natural environment. Whenever possible, I take the children to archaeological sites as well as museums. There they can also explore the production, use, and abandonment of artefacts within their original context and natural environment, rather than only experiencing static museum displays. For example, during our children's camp at the Fudōdō site in 2018 in Toyama prefecture, the children explored the archaeological site and the nearby mountain to find a clay source [Fig. 6a]. According to local archaeological research, Jōmon people may have used this same clay source for their ceramics.

We also examine the vertical formation of cultural landscapes through time: how can the artefacts discovered in underground layers show us the lives of people in the past? For a project in 2021, we asked the children to imagine what 23rd-century archaeologists might discover when excavating a site from the 21st century. The children chose present-day materials such as plastic, metals, and modern garbage, to insert into the clay panel that mimics the soil layers of the excavation [Fig. 6b]. I enjoy working with children because their manner of exploration is very physical. They do not have the vocabulary or preconceptions that adults have, so they come up with very original and free ideas.



Fig. 7 (left): The post-disaster landscape at Minamisōma, Fukushima: visually impaired artists exploring the new “seascape” made of concrete. (Photo by Sahoko Aki, 2023)

### The role of heritage in resilience and community (re)-building

**IB:** You also became involved in several heritage projects throughout Japan, collaborating with archaeologists and local communities to increase awareness of the local heritage through “art and archaeology” projects, and to explore regional revitalisation. A particularly poignant example is the Power of the Invisible project, which focuses on the Urajiri Shell Mound site in Minamisōma, Fukushima prefecture. This region suffered greatly in the Great East Japan Disaster of 11 March 2011.<sup>7</sup> In the aftermath of the devastating earthquake and tsunami, here the disaster was compounded by the meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power plant. The entire town had to be evacuated for five years because of the radiation risks, causing the displaced community to scatter across the country. You encountered the local heritage manager Tsuyoshi KAWATA in 2017 and started this collaborative project, where a team consisting of international archaeologists, heritage specialists, artists, and local residents are exploring the role of tangible and intangible heritage in community (re)building. A special “Focus” section about disaster, resilience, heritage conservation, and community-building (planned for The Newsletter in 2026) aims to present their experience and diverse perspectives. But meanwhile, can you tell us a bit more about your experiences?

**SA:** For example, Fudōdō in Toyama is quite a typical heritage site in a rural area, where the local community still has a strong link with their cultural and archaeological heritage, because the landscape has not changed that radically in 5000 years. But in Minamisōma in Fukushima prefecture, the entire modern landscape was destroyed, reverting to an almost prehistoric-like state. The rice paddies reverted into a marsh area. The local fishing village was destroyed. Only some houses, farms, and the Urajiri Shell mound Jōmon site located on hills were left safe. The traditional local landscape has irrevocably changed, with installations such as concrete wall reinforcements against the sea [Fig. 7].

Many people lost their homes; residents were uprooted after their five-year relocation. Tsuyoshi Kawata, who is responsible for the



Urajiri site, also was in charge of saving the endangered local tangible and intangible heritage.<sup>8</sup> The local festivals and traditional crafts – for which the Minamisōma region is famous – are at risk of disappearing after the disaster. Because Urajiri Shell Mound already received the status of “National Historic Site” before the disaster, the site landscape is guaranteed to be preserved, and Urajiri has become a focal point for community-rebuilding activities.<sup>9</sup> At first, Kawata had concerns about the relevance of this prehistoric site for the Minamisōma residents. However, after the evacuation, Urajiri site became an indispensable meeting place for residents. Some of them can see their lost village land from there. Many local people have become personally invested in this site, taking care of it. The stone age shell mound has become their common preserved cultural heritage.<sup>10</sup> So much has been lost, but together with the local residents who returned, as well as the newly arrived residents, the project members are discovering the important role of diverse cultural heritages, tangible and intangible, and are learning and sharing the experience of the regional history. What really impressed me after working with them for eight years, is how their local heritage is helping the community with their recovery. Large-scale disasters can happen anywhere in the world, but perhaps the lesson from Minamisōma is that community memories with cultural heritage can play a powerful role in community (re)building, and ultimately in people’s recovery and resilience.

### Inclusive accessibility to heritage

**IB:** The Urajiri site also featured in two “Art and Archaeology” initiatives to make museum exhibitions and heritage sites more accessible to people with disabilities, in particular visual impairment. You contributed an art installation to the tactile exhibition at the 2021 “Universal Museum” exhibition at the National Ethnology Museum in Osaka.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, The Artist Residence Project recently collaborated with two artists with visual disabilities to develop sensible accessibility for the Urajiri site. These projects and their outcomes are described in greater detail in our forthcoming article.<sup>12</sup> Could you briefly explain the purpose of your art installation at the tactile Universal Museum exhibition? And what did you learn from collaborating with the artists with visual disabilities?

**SA:** The “Universal Museum” exhibition, organised by Kōjirō HIROSE (an anthropologist who had become blind at a young age), was based on principles of Universal Design, and aimed to stimulate visitors both with and without visual impairments. He started this project twenty years ago in an interdisciplinary research group, including artists like me and many with visual disabilities. Fumio OBARA and Takaaki KASUGAI were among them. For this exhibition Hirose asked me to make an artwork that would allow people with visual disabilities to “touch landscape.”<sup>13</sup> I decided to make a three-dimensional vertical cross-cut of the Urajiri Shell Mound landscape, to show how soil layers built up through time, and to make stratigraphy and site landscape formation understandable to everyone, including visually impaired people, and children [Fig. 8a]. People could touch the soil layers, the flora and fauna in the landscape, and the prehistoric tools such as digging sticks and axes [Fig. 8b].

Related to this exhibit, the art and archaeology team also organised a special outdoor workshop for children to find their own digging sticks to decorate and use as a useful tool. To their excitement, Fumio Obara then spontaneously took the children on an adventure, navigating and exploring with the use of his stick. This experience of navigating the outdoors without using sight (using sound and touch) made a strong impact on the children.

We were impressed with Obara’s enthusiasm to research everything about the Urajiri site. He and Kasugai also were invited as Artists in Residence. Together



Fig. 8a (above): “Tree on a Shell Mound” 3-D artwork in Osaka, made with acrylic paint, laser-cut wood, Japanese Washi paper, crushed shells, and clay. (Photo by Sahoko Aki, 2021).

Fig. 8b (right): Close-up: Children touching “Tree on a Shell Mound” painting at the tactile exhibition “Universal Museum” at the National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) in Osaka (Photo by Sahoko Aki, 2021).



with a team of local resident volunteers and heritage specialists, they participated in a multisensory exploration of the Urajiri site, its material culture, and its natural environment in October and November 2023. Obara was particularly keen to discover the tree in my art installation within Urajiri’s landscape. In February 2024, we had a project exhibition in Minamisōma to share the results of their fieldworks in artistic expression with the local residents.<sup>14</sup> Obara expressed the view of the Urajiri archaeological site without sight [Fig. 9]. Through tactile exploration, he is able to gather such vivid pieces of memories (on top of what he studied), and he processes these into a shape by woodcarving. His experiences are concentrated in his artwork, and people receive a powerful symbolic narrative. I respect and admire him, as it can be my ideal reconstruction.

Reconstructed images can make an impact on contemporary society, when they reflect recognizable elements from life. “Art and Archaeology” practices invite people to enjoy the reconstruction images by including relatable experiences, on top of the factual archaeological data. Moreover, by including a diversity of perspectives, there is potential to reach more diverse communities. The vivid reality in the image grasps their attention, and people receive the symbolic message. These experiences are inspired by diverse voices and people who participated in our “Art and Archaeology” projects.<sup>15</sup>

#### Sahoko AKI

is an artist and a professional illustrator, and specializes in archaeological reconstructions in collaboration with researchers. She is involved in various cultural heritage projects in Japan aimed at accessibility diversification. She is an art educator for young children, and a cooperative research fellow at the Centre for Spatial Information Science (CSIS) at the University of Tokyo. Email: [saho2213@gmail.com](mailto:saho2213@gmail.com)

#### Ilona BAUSCH

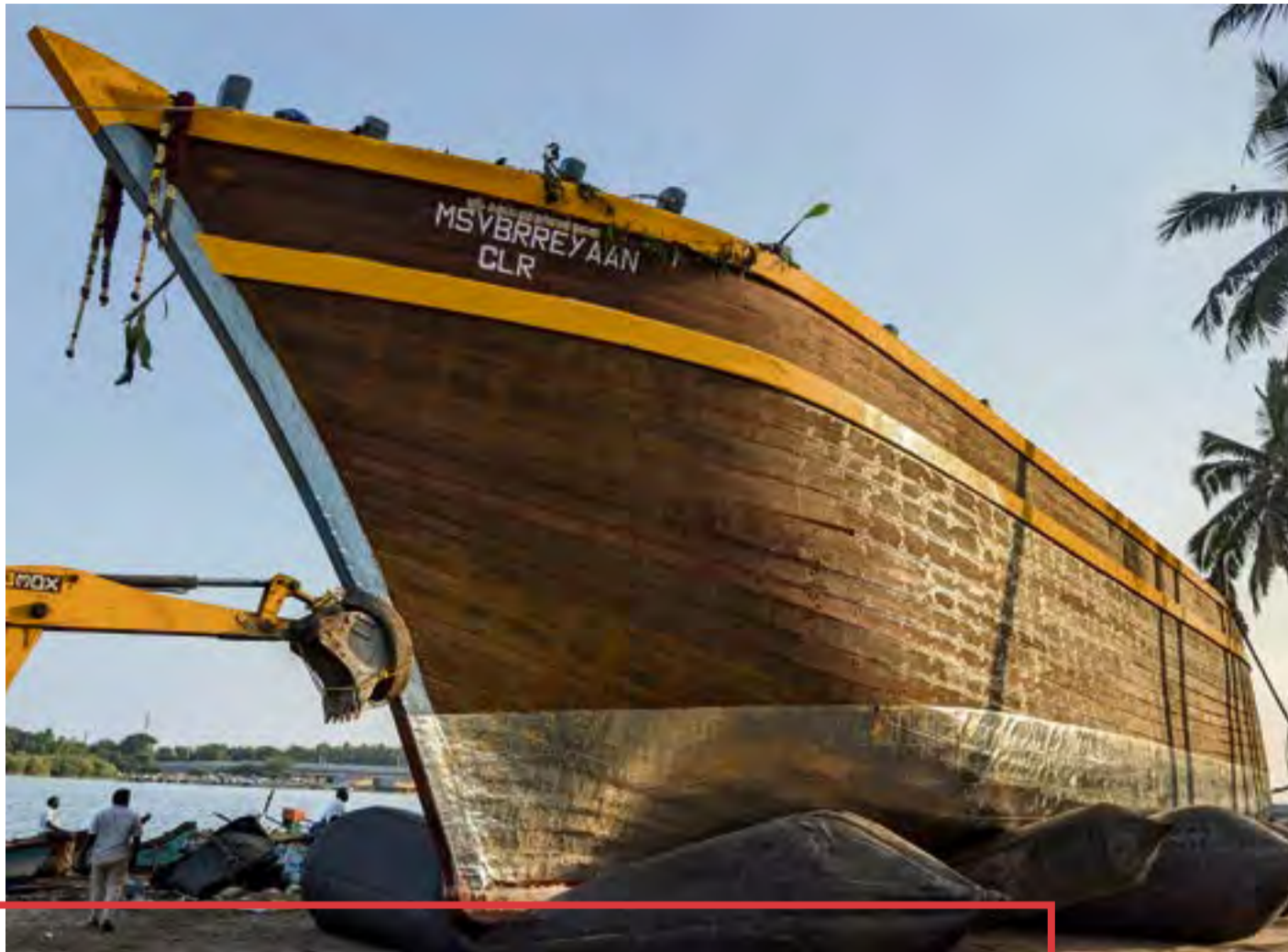
explores prehistoric adornment, identity, society, and ritual, as well as contemporary heritage practices, in East Asia. She studied Japanese archaeology and cultural heritage at Leiden University, Durham University and Kokugakuin University (Tokyo), and has taught at Leiden University, and University of Tokyo. She currently teaches at Heidelberg University. Email: [ilonabausch@gmail.com](mailto:ilonabausch@gmail.com)

Fig. 9 (below): Fumio Obara and archaeologists exploring the landscape at Urajiri site in Minamisōma. (Photo by Sahoko Aki, 2023).



#### Notes

- Sahoko Aki’s website and artworks can be seen at: [http://www.tkazu.com/saho/2018page/seisaku\\_fukugen.html](http://www.tkazu.com/saho/2018page/seisaku_fukugen.html).
- Ilona Bausch currently teaches at the Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies, Institute of East Asian Art History (IKO). <https://www.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/iko/institute/staff/bausch/>. Her publications can be found at: <https://uni-heidelberg.academia.edu/IlonaBausch>.
- The name of the Art and Archaeology Project organised by Sahoko Aki is アートと考古学国際交流研究会 (Āto to Kōkogaku Kokusaikōryū Kenkyūkai; The Locality Research and Workshop Project International Exchange Group for Art and Archaeology). The project is supported by the Toshiba International Foundation (TIFO), and the Department of Cultural Properties in Minamisōma city. The ‘artist in residence’ project was supported by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, Japan (METI) 2024 Subsidy for regional economic policy promotion projects (visual arts and culture support projects). Records of the project practices (2018–2024) including “Power of the Invisible” can be seen at the YouTube channel “Art and Archaeology Practices Japan”: <https://www.youtube.com/@artarchaeologypracticeja-yx4zg>.
- The Jōmon period shows great spatial and chronological diversity, and is seen as multiple Jōmon cultures. For example, in Southern Japan (Kyūshū) the Jōmon ends around 800BCE, due to migrations and cultural innovations from the continent, while in Northern Japan the Jōmon persisted until 300BCE.
- More information about Sannai-Maruyama and the UNESCO World Heritage Jōmon sites in Northern Japan can be found at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1632> and <https://jomon-japan.jp/en/learn/jomon-sites/sannai-maruyama>.
- NEOMAP project (P.I. Junzo Uchiyama) at Research Institute for Humanity and Nature in Kyoto [https://www.chikyuu.ac.jp/rihn\\_e/activities/project/detail/50/](https://www.chikyuu.ac.jp/rihn_e/activities/project/detail/50/). Its publications can be found at <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Junzo-Uchiyama>.
- For more on the impact of the Disaster on cultural heritage, see the online conference *Cultural properties recovered? 10 years on from the Great East Japan Disaster*, organised by the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures (SISJAC, Norwich, UK) in 2021. Aki’s contribution can be seen at the 32:50–43:53 time stamp. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSMs7qy9d1Q>
- More details about Minamisōma’s tangible and intangible heritage: <https://www.city.minamisoma.lg.jp/portal/english/aboutminamisoma/history/25072.html>
- Including our “Art and Archaeology” project *Power of the Invisibles*. See the video: “Day of an Art and Archaeology show on the shellmound field” (1:40 minutes) by Art and Archaeology Practice Japan: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q\\_H0cZQrEVg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_H0cZQrEVg)
- See the video: “Urajiri Shell Mound 10 years after disaster: Interviews with local managers” (7 minutes) by Art and Archaeology Practice Japan: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpQa4anoA14>.
- “Universal Museum” English-language website: [https://www.minpaku.ac.jp/en/ai1ec\\_event/16856](https://www.minpaku.ac.jp/en/ai1ec_event/16856).
- Aki, S. & I.R. Bausch (forthcoming). Inclusive art & archaeology projects in Japan: multisensory exploration and the significance of visually impaired people’s participation in cultural heritage. In: C. Dunning, C. Aeschmann, M.H. van den Dries, S. Ebrahimiabareghi & A. Comer (eds), *Ensuring access to archaeological sites. Reflections and examples of good practice*. Interdisciplinary Contributions to Archaeology. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature.
- The artwork “A Tree on the Shellmound” was also featured as the frontispiece of the Editorial by Robert Witcher in *Antiquity* Volume 95 , Issue 380 , April 2021 , pp. 283 - 291. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2021.26>
- Fumio Obara’s field work in Minamisōma in 2024 can be seen at “Art and Archaeology Practice 2024 with Obara” (17 mins). <https://youtu.be/6uKyq5xp3wY?si=vAcocPSYPDvrOPCg>.
- We are very grateful to our many collaborators and participants: Members of the Art and Archaeology Research Group, and Tsuyoshi Kawata, Noriko Kawabata, Takashi Kubo, Kōjirō Hirose, Yasuhiro Okada, Fumio Obara, and Takaaki Kasugai; Minamisōma City Education Board, and Osaka International School of Kwansai University. Last but not least, the Art and Archaeology projects would have been impossible without the invaluable financial support of the Toshiba International Foundation (TIFO) and Fukushima Culture Art Promotion Office, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, Japan (METI).



# Boats for the Future

Gopinath Sricandane, Balasubramanian  
Dhandapani, and Denis Vidal

We felt dwarfed against the huge wooden frames of a boat that resembled the whale bones in a natural history museum. It was our first visit to the small boat yard in the village of Thaikkal, on the southern outskirts of Cuddalore town, Tamil Nadu, India, where a community of fisher-carpenters with tools and know-how were building ocean-crossing wooden vessels. A sense of amazement set in due to the fact that wooden cargo ships were still being built at a time when the maritime trade is dominated by massive steel cargo ships, which carry enormous cargoes and berth in deep water ports. In 2013, when we first visited, we did not know that we would return to this boatyard for the next ten years to study, learn, and document the way the wooden cargo ships were built, and that we would get to know the community of fisher carpenters that continue this collaborative work through technological innovations and an astute business sense.

## Boats of the Coromandel: Past to the present

Wooden cargo ships have been built on the Coromandel coast – the east coast of the peninsular India – for the last two millennia. References to wooden ships are found in the literature,<sup>1</sup> but only scattered references are available from temple inscriptions. However, there is a complete lack of evidence on the communities that built these boats or the types of vessels that were built. Fast forward to the 20th century, when James Hornell (1918) writes his observations on the lighters and barges with sails in Tuticorin that ferried cargo to and from the steamers anchored mid-sea. According to Hornell, the lighters initially resembled the English design with square stern. The lighting trade was thriving. The local fishermen over the years made modifications

Wooden boats that sailed for millennia are still being built in the village of Thaikkal, a fishing hamlet in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, India. This is in spite of technological advancements in the maritime world, the development of road and rail infrastructure especially in post-independence India, the containerisation of the maritime trade by large shipping agencies, and state policies that favour large corporations. The list of odds against the wooden sailing vessels extends on, and yet they manage to find a niche, ensuring their survival, at least for the time being. Through this study we examine a series of factors – economical, environmental, political, and social – that has affected this craft and reflect on the questions that emerged out of our decade-long study.

to suit the local needs, but they were also influenced by the design of the Arab vessels that traded from the Persian Gulf to Bombay and Tuticorin. The rake of the bow and stern kept reducing, and the resulting design looked quite alike the plank-built canoe, Hornell observes. Some enterprising boat owners built larger versions called the *padagu* and sailed them exclusively for coasting trade. Eventually these vessels came to be called *thoni*, for which Tuticorin is famous.

Meanwhile, in the coastal town of Cuddalore, the British colonial power set up Fort St. David along with a port by the mid-18th century. The port, now located in the old part of the town, was active until as late as the 1990. Steamers and ships docked mid-sea, owing to the lack of draft in the port. This spawned a thriving lighterage trade. The lighters of Cuddalore were called *vathal*, typically with a five to 20-ton capacity, which ferried cargoes from and to the docked ships. A number of families were involved in this trade as lascars, carpenters, and *mistri* (master carpenters), who played a crucial role in building and repairing these wooden *vathals*. Ayyadurai, one of the elders of the Thaikkal village, was born in the 1930s and had been a sailor and owner of *vathals*. He possessed a canny business sense and, with the help of the local fisher-carpenters, embarked on a new project of building a

larger *vathal* in the 1950s with a capacity of 75 tons, meant for the coasting trade. The vessel he built kept the existing functional design of the lighting *vathal* and enlarged it proportionately. Since the new vessel was on the same lines as the existing *vathals*, it did not require new expertise. Relying on sails, these large *vathals* now travelled long distances for coastal trade. Thus was born the *paai vathal* of Cuddalore (*paai* = sails).

Over the years, the 75-ton *paai vathal* doubled in size to 150 tons. In Tuticorin, further south of Cuddalore, the *thonis* have grown in size as well, carrying up to 400 tons. These wooden cargo vessels were the mainstay of the coastal trade. They carried vegetables, coconuts, and pottery to Sri Lanka, and they transported rice from the eastern coast to Kerala and Mangalore. After unloading at Mangalore, they would sail further north laden with tiles and sand needed for the ceramic factories around Bombay (Mumbai) and further up to the state of Gujarat. On the return journey, they bring wheat and other goods. By the 1970s, wooden cargo vessels played a major role in moving over one million tons of cargo along the Indian coast. In 1982, the Cuddalore-made *paai vathal* took an evolutionary step forward to keep up with times. This time, too, it was an initiative by Ayyadurai to fit an engine to the sailing vessel. This meant the design had to

## List of Terms

### Nautical Terms

rake: the sloping angle of a ship's bow or stern

stern: rear end of a boat

bow: the forward part of the hull of a boat

draft: submerged part of the boat, usually measured from the waterline to the bottom most part of a boat.

### Vernacular Terms

*padagu*: boat

*paai*: sail

*vathal*: wooden barge

*mistri*: master carpenter

*tindal*: captain of a boat

*kotia*: wooden cargo boat built in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu, India.

*thoni*: wooden cargo boat built in Tuticorin, located in southern Tamil Nadu, India.

be reworked to accommodate the heavy, vibrating diesel engine and a propeller. The addition of the engine gave birth to a hybrid vessel, which earned legal recognition as a Mechanised Sailing Vessel (MSV), while locally it earned the name “*kotia*.”

## Life of a *kotia*: Materials, skills, and sustainability

The building of a *kotia* begins with a discussion between the owner and the *mistri*. The owner puts forth his expectation of carrying capacity of the *kotia*, and then the *mistri* works out the dimensions and comes up with an estimate of how much the whole endeavour would cost. Once the two are in agreement, the owner makes the funds available in a phased manner.

The *mistri* then begins to source required wood and put together a team of carpenters and helpers. For the keel and the frames, wood with high density and high oil content is preferred, because such wood in an event of impact would only chip off and not break into pieces.<sup>2</sup> While timber merchants in the region might stock these woods, the *mistri* taps into his own network of woodcutters who may know if a suitable species of tree is about to be cut. Much of the wood is sourced from private farms and temple lands, particularly for *Iluppai* (Mahua - *Madhuca longifolia*); with conservation efforts gaining momentum, sourcing wood from the forests of Western Ghats is reducing. The unfortunate felling of old trees as part of road expansion projects sometimes also becomes sources of wood. There are brokers who roam around a radius of 50-70 km, send pictures of the trees to be cut to the *mistri*, and act as middlemen in supplying wood. Huge trees such as the Malaysian sal from Southeast Asia and other species from central Africa are used for planks.

It takes a team of about 15-20 carpenters, five helpers, and at least a three-member team of ironsmiths to fabricate and supply 1.5 tons of nails. A caulking team of 10 with its own *mistri* ensures the *kotia* is watertight. A five-member team of painters, engine mechanics, electricians, and fiberglass fabricators also play their parts. Altogether, 50 people directly or indirectly work on building a *kotia*.

The *mistri* assembles such a diverse team from the vicinity. Most crafts in the Indian context are closely associated and practiced by caste groups. The transfer of knowledge is often guarded within the community. But in the case of building a *kotia*, although



Fig. 2: Fisher-carpenters manoeuvring a heavy piece of wood. [Photo courtesy of the authors, 2014]

the majority of the workers hail from the fishing community, those from outside of it are also welcome. We have, during the course of our study, met a *mistri* from a different caste whose primary occupation was agriculture. We have similarly had migrant workers from eastern Uttar Pradesh working as helpers at the boat yard. On average, most workers get a daily wage of 900 Indian Rupees (~10 Euros). The *mistri* in fact gets only 100 rupees more than the rest of the workers.

A good majority of workers were school dropouts or at most completed high school. At the boatbuilding yard on the riverbank of Thaikkal, their long apprenticeship begins with the basic task of helping the carpenters. As Kathiravan, a *mistri* who collaborated with us throughout the study period said about himself, “no one will teach you how to hold a chisel. You observe others and begin to work with the chisel, the seniors will watch your work and give crucial tips once they see that you are interested in learning.” Today the fisher-carpenters of the Cuddalore region have built up such a reputation that teams are regularly dispatched to Mangalore on the west coast, where they repair and refit wooden cargo vessels.

A newly built *kotia* typically runs for 8-10 years before requiring a thorough refit. At this stage, some frames and several planks are replaced, engines are overhauled, and the ship is ready to set sail for another eight years or so. By that time, most owners – barring mishaps in mid-sea resulting in total loss – claimed to have recovered their investments and reaped considerable profit. With every refit the *kotia* gets a fresh lease of life. We have seen a vessel that was still sailing 70 years after it was made. Some may argue that wooden cargo boats accelerate deforestation. However, a careful comparison of the environmental footprint of a steel boat, whose lifespan is less than 25 years and by the end of its life will have to be destroyed, tells us the wooden cargo boats fare better.<sup>3</sup> They can be renovated to become a new ship every decade, and because it is made of wood, the removed parts degrade naturally and thus produce less environmental pollution. If their hybrid nature of using engines and sails for propulsion is augmented, they might make more sense in the long term for environmental sustainability.

### Crew and revenue sharing

Typically, a crew of eight to ten members work on a *kotia*. This includes the *tindal* or captain, the driver manning the wheels and

maintaining the engine, and the lascars. It is also common for one or two apprentices to work on board, and they often start their careers as cooks. Among the fishing community it is common practice to share the revenue generated from the (fish) catch. Similarly, on a *kotia*, out of the total revenue generated, 65 percent of the share is given to the owner. The remaining 35 percent is shared among the crew. The *tindal* gets two shares, the driver gets 1.5 shares, and the lascars get one share each. If there is an apprentice, he gets half a share. An interesting factor that we have observed was the acquisition of knowledge through apprenticeship. Most *tindals* we spoke with started at the bottom of the hierarchy as a cook and acquired the necessary knowledge of navigation to become a *tindal*. Another aspect we observed was that the experienced crew members do not hesitate to shift roles and attend to the need at hand to ensure smooth sailing.

### Challenges and adaptations

In maritime trade today, the norms are capital-intensive gigantic cargo vessels, containerisation, and deep water ports. These changes, which began globally in the 1960s, have adversely impacted the wooden cargo vessels. For example, they were not allowed to berth alongside steel cargo ships because a collision would completely wreck the wooden boat. Oftentimes, wooden cargo vessels were forced to wait for days outside of port before they were given the clearance to dock and unload the cargo. If the vessel was carrying

perishable cargo, a few extra days of waiting meant huge losses. Moreover, wooden sailing vessels were not efficient at braking and changing course compared to the fossil-fuel powered cargo ships that could make quick manoeuvres. For this reason, wooden sailing vessels were considered dangerous on busy shipping lanes.

In the 1950s, the Indo-Norwegian Project gave a push for mechanisation and improved efficiency in the fishing industry in India. Imported diesel-powered engines were being fitted in a variety of the vessels. We understand from our interviews with the fisher-carpenters of Cuddalore that while they welcomed the introduction of diesel engines in fishing vessels, the design of the engine itself was not suited to the local environment. The oil-cooled engines proved to be high-maintenance. They then embarked on modifying the cooling unit of the engine to use sea water instead of oil. This they achieved with an Ashok Leyland truck engine. Adapting this customised engine to the sailing vessels gave birth to the mechanised sailing vessel (MSV). This mechanisation brought better manoeuvrability which helped them to survive the challenges posed by the mainstream maritime industry.

### Finding niches for survival

The Indian state recognises the MSVs (*kotias*) as traditional vessels, meaning that its crew members are exempt from the mandatory training seamen and captains have to undergo. As one *kotia* owner told us, if this recognition is revoked and seaman training is made mandatory, then he would be obliged to pay monthly salaries on par with a merchant navy. It will render the *kotia* trade totally unviable.

Large cargo ships and containerisation could move huge amounts of cargo at a reduced freight cost. The development of rail and road networks, especially along the west coast since the 1990s, have almost killed the *kotia* trade along the west coast. The banning of *kotia* at all Sri Lankan ports for geopolitical reasons ruined the Ceylon trade for which the Tuticorin *thonis* were known. Trade with the Maldives has considerably dwindled as the Maldivian authorities have started demanding passports of Indian sailors. The traditional sailor card issued by the local port authority is all the legal paper the crew members carry. However, these challenges failed to eliminate the *kotia* trade. When the coastal trade dwindled, the *kotia* owners found lucrative business ferrying goods to the islands of Lakshadweep. The seas around these islands are shallow. The populations are low, so the quantities of cargo needed are also relatively low. The *kotias*, it turned out, are best suited for this environment. As Kathiravan *mistri* explained to us, the design of the Cuddalore-made *kotia* barely needs a draft of seven or eight feet to sail into any shallow port. Today, for most of the *kotia* owners the Mangalore-Beyppore-Lakshadweep route provides the bulk of the annual trade.

In the post-pandemic scenario, Roshan Fernando, a *kotia* (*thoni*) owner from Tuticorin, says that he could transport cargo on wooden *thonis* for almost half the cost of what a container-based shipping company would charge. Celestine Villavarayar, hailing from a Tuticorin family that has been in shipping for

generations, said that his grandfather had a fleet of *thonis* and had earned the title of “Sea King.” Though stevedoring has become the primary business of the family, he built a *kotia* at Cuddalore in 2013, not just in the memory of his grandfather or to keep the heritage alive, but also for the fact that it is economically profitable.

### Lessons and the future

When researchers study craft practices as forms of knowledge, they tend to see them through the lens of dichotomies such as codified knowledge versus tacit knowledge. Observing the craft of building wooden cargo ships for a decade shows us that this craft does not fit well into any such dichotomy. For one, no *mistri* we spoke with studied ship architecture, and there are no written manuals they follow to build these wooden cargo boats. There are no guides for the axeman on how to size the wooden log into a perfectly fitting frame. The boat yard is a chaotic place. So many activities happen simultaneously, it seems everybody and every small team is working on their own. The *mistri* may not oversee each task, yet ensures that everyone’s work synchronises to achieve the overall process of building. On more than one occasion, we have also seen an experienced *mistri* work under a younger *mistri*. This is because, in this craft practice, transmission of knowledge and know-how travels both ways.

We are also conditioned to understand craft as something delicate, precise, or meditative. Boatbuilding, on the other hand, requires raw muscle power of multiple men to move heavy wooden logs and hammer six-inch nails. Many of these activities are dangerous. Yet the vessels they build cross oceans, provide livelihood, and contribute to the economy.

Strict regulations in Europe to reduce environmental pollution in the maritime traffic is pushing the maritime industry to reintroduce wind propulsion and cut down emissions. On the other hand, the hybrid nature of the *kotias* – using the sail to save on fuel consumption – demonstrates an environmentally friendly and an economically viable model. We hope that such artisanal practices, which have been reinvented in changing contexts, are studied more closely, as this could potentially lead to inspirations and an exchange of ideas. Such exchanges can help address existing environmental challenges, meet economic needs, and also sustain traditions such as the wooden cargo boats.

**Gopinath Sricandane** leads several archival projects at the Institut Français de Pondichéry (IFP) and specialises in visual documentation. Email: [gopinath.s@ifpindia.org](mailto:gopinath.s@ifpindia.org)

**Balasubramanian Dhandapani** is a research engineer at the Institut Français de Pondichéry (IFP), and his research revolves around technology and society relationships. Email: [balu.d@ifpindia.org](mailto:balu.d@ifpindia.org)

**Denis Vidal** is a social anthropologist and Director of Research at Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, Marseille (IRD). His work covers various topics on Indian culture and society. His recent research focuses on a comparative approach of art, craft and technology. Email: [dvidal@ehess.fr](mailto:dvidal@ehess.fr)

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Fig. 3: Inside the hull of a *kotia*. [Photo courtesy of the authors, 2014]



Fig. 1: Kew Huang Keng 九皇宮 receives the Dipper Mother in the form of a consecrated censer at the coast of Singapore. Note the all-white attire scheme and bundles of unworn yellow wristbands (on a plate), and the censer in the foreground. (Photograph courtesy of the Nine Emperor Gods Project, 2016)

## The Nine Emperor Gods religious networks in 19th-century Southeast Asia

The origins of the Nine Emperor Gods Festival and its worship are still unclear, although it is generally agreed that two of the earliest festival centres in Southeast Asia were the Kathu Shrine 內杼斗母宮 in Phuket, Thailand, and the Hong Kong Street Dou Mu Gong 香港斗母宮 on Penang Island in Malaysia, during the 19th century. In Phuket, the festival was introduced by a visiting opera troupe that advised the Fujianese labourers working in the tin mines to observe a vegetarian diet and celebrate the festival to overcome a plague.<sup>2</sup>

On Penang Island, Fujianese sailors enshrined incense ashes dedicated to the Nine Emperor Gods with Qiu [Khoo] Macheng 邱妈诚 (1784-1841), along with a religious scripture bearing the deities' names. Khoo's descendants continue to run the temple to this day.<sup>3</sup> From the Hong Kong Street Dou Mu Gong, incense ashes were brought to Singapore by the businessman Ong Choo Kee 王珠玑, who initially enshrined them within his home on Lim Loh Village in 1902. In 1921, the ashes were moved to a permanent location at the Hougang Tou Mu Kung 后港斗母宮 on Upper Serangoon Road.<sup>4</sup>

From the Kathu Shrine in Phuket, incense ashes dedicated to the Nine Emperor Gods spread to other parts of the region, notably Ampang in Selangor and Taiping in Perak, where significant religious centres dedicated to the Nine Emperor Gods were established. The Ampang Nan Tian Gong 南天宮 (founded circa. 1862) became an important hub for the Nine Emperor Gods worship, aided significantly by travellers who carried incense ashes or sacred objects from the temple to other parts of the region.<sup>5</sup> This led to the founding of Hong San Temple 凤山宮 in Singapore (circa. 1904), as well as the Pak Tiam Keong 马六甲北添宮 in Malacca and the Shin Sen Keng 神仙宮 in Singapore (both established in the 1920s). Others travelled to Ampang to receive the Nine Emperor Gods incense ashes, such as the case of Sam Siang Keng in Johor Bahru 柔佛三善宮, which began observing the festival from the 1950s onward.

## The Nine Emperor Gods Festival and the political economy of Southeast Asia

A common thread among the earliest religious centres of the Nine Emperor Gods Festival in Southeast Asia, established from the early to late 19th century, was their close association with the extractive economies that characterised the region's pre-colonial and colonial political economy. Tin played a significant role in this economy, serving as a major source of commerce managed and contested by Chinese businessmen. Phuket and Penang were deeply intertwined in this manner, with tin harvested from Phuket and southern Siam and then refined for sale to the world via Penang.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, and perhaps not coincidentally, business holdings were established on both Penang and Phuket by the Fujianese mutual aid organisation known as the Kian Teik Tong 建德堂. This organisation wielded considerable influence in the management of labour and political affairs in the region before its eventual disbandment by the British Societies Act of 1889 in colonial Malaya. The Kian Teik Tong's headquarters at Armenian Street on Penang Island not only served as a temporary site for the Nine Emperor Gods worship under the supervision of the Khoo family but also facilitated labour and tin exports from Phuket.<sup>7</sup>

This pattern was also evident in Ampang, whose road connection to the city of Kuala Lumpur was developed by Kapitan Yap Ah Loy (1837-1885) and predominantly populated by Hakka tin-miners, though the temple also had a strong Anxi (Fujianese) presence during the 19th century.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Taiping in Perak emerged as a centre for financing and processing tin with the discovery of tin deposits in the Larut region. The Nine Emperor Gods worship began there

# The Nine Emperor Gods Festival in Southeast Asia

## History, Networks, and Identity

SOH Chuah Meng Esmond  
and KOH Keng We

The Nine Emperor Gods Festival is a nine-day festival observed from the first to the ninth days of the ninth lunar month among the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. This festival honours the Nine Emperor Gods 九皇大帝 and their matriarch, the Dipper Mother 斗母, with devotees adopting a regimen of vegetarianism and abstinence, and dressing in white attire adorned with white headkerchiefs, yellow wristbands, and girdles [Fig. 1].

From the eighth lunar month onward, Nine Emperor Gods temples in Southeast Asia and their communities intensify preparations for the festival and begin the associated vegetarian diets. Temples raise nine lamps from bamboo sprigs or areca trees, a ritual performed either before or after receiving the deities. The festival officially begins with the arrival of the Nine Emperor Gods in the last week of the eighth lunar month. Devotees gather by the sea, rivers, lakes, or other water bodies connected to the sea to receive a consecrated incense censer. This censer is enshrined in a secret room known as the Inner Palace 内殿 for the duration of the festival, concealed under a yellow cloth or covered palanquin whenever it is moved.

During the festival, temples conduct various rituals to bless the community. On the concluding day, the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, the Nine Emperor Gods and their censers are sent off by the sea or other water body where they were earlier received. This marks the festival's climax, with devotees flocking to temples and the seaside to bid farewell to the Nine Emperor Gods. For many temples, the festival officially ends with the lowering of the Nine Lamps in the late morning of the tenth day.

In recent decades, studies of Chinese societies in Southeast Asia have increasingly focused on popular Chinese religion. Previously, scholarship primarily examined major traditions like Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, or the cosmological and scriptural aspects of local practices linked to these religions. Since the post-war period, especially from the 1980s onwards, scholars

have adopted anthropological approaches, situating religious practices within their social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. Taiwan and Chinese communities in Southeast Asia have become key focal points for these studies.

Scholarship on the Nine Emperor Gods Festival has grown in recent decades. Historically, in Southeast Asia, the festival has achieved a notable translocal and transregional profile among Chinese communities. Its scale, its duration, the restrictions on devotees' daily lives, and the unique colours and rituals have made it a significant fixture in the traditional religious life of overseas communities [Fig. 2]. Our research project places the festival and its elements within their broader historical context in China and Southeast Asia,

as well as the history of Chinese migration between regions. Additionally, we examine the festival's rituals, representations, material culture, symbolisms, and belief systems within the long-term history of Chinese culture and traditions.<sup>1</sup>

Although the festival has been observed in China since the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the version observed by overseas Chinese communities from the latter half of the 19th century onwards, and especially in Southeast Asia, is distinct in its dress code, rituals, and purpose. This article examines how the festival's transformation reflects the histories, contexts, and memories of southern Chinese migration to Southeast Asia and the historical evolution of the societies, cultures, and traditions in the region over the past two centuries.

Fig. 2: Devotees, palanquin bearers, and leaders of Leong Nam Temple 龙南殿 paying their respects before they send off the Nine Emperor Gods on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month. (Photograph courtesy of the Nine Emperor Gods Project, 2016/2017)



Fig. 3: Leaders of the Ampang Nan Tian Gong await the departure of the Nine Emperor Gods. Note the dress code of white clothing and white headkerchiefs, and the concealed entrance of the Inner Palace. (Photograph by Esmond Soh, October 2023)



with the enshrinement of incense ashes from the Kathu Shrine by Wang Yiyu 王奕鱼. Wang's cousin Yihou 王奕猴 later travelled to Ipoh, which by the 1880s had become a prosperous city due to tin harvesting from the surrounding Kinta River. There, he founded another Nine Emperor Gods temple in 1896.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the initial genesis of these Nine Emperor Gods temples was closely tied to Southeast Asia's political economy and could not be separated from their initial popularity and appeal among the labourers and financiers who lived and worked in these locations.

### The Nine Emperor Gods Festival and Chinese Identities in Southeast Asia

There are numerous unique accounts of the Nine Emperor Gods that have proliferated in Southeast Asia, in addition to East Asian traditions, where the deities are conventionally (but not always) conceived as stars. They represent different manifestations and memories of the Nine Emperor Gods in different historical periods and geographical regions, and their significance for different Chinese communities. Despite their differences, many of these accounts share common tropes. We will briefly summarise a few of the most prominent ones below.

In two *Nanyang Siang Pau* reports from after the Japanese Occupation of Malaya (1939-1945), the Nine Emperor Gods are depicted as nine brothers who defied Qin Shihuang (259-210 BCE). The emperor enlisted a ritual master who beheaded them and sealed their bodies in a vessel set adrift at sea. A fisherman later released their remains, and the brothers reappeared before the Qin emperor. Terrified, Qin placated them by granting them the title 'Emperor Gods' 皇爷神 and building temples where their images were absent due to their decapitation.<sup>10</sup>

A separate account of the Nine Emperor Gods' origins in Southeast Asia emerged 50 years later in a commemorative volume by the Ampang Nan Tian Gong. During the Qing invasion of China, nine pro-Ming martyrs were beheaded, and their heads were sealed in a vessel set adrift at sea. Fishermen in Fujian found the vessel, leading to widespread grief. A grand funeral was held, with mourners donning white clothing [Fig. 3]. To avoid Qing suspicion, these martyrs were collectively honoured as the 'Nine Emperor Gods.' During the festival, the temples' Inner Palace was completely out of bounds, as Ming loyalists used the room as a meeting-place to plot the overthrow of the Qing dynasty.<sup>11</sup>

The Nine Emperor Gods may also refer to Robin Hood-like pirates, who became deified for their heroic deeds. Kim Edwards recounts a Mr. Foo's version of the Nine Emperor Gods' origin in Kuantan, Pahang. Nine brothers in Qing China, who stole from wealthy foreigners to aid their neighbours, were beheaded by Qing forces. Later, nine

incense censers drifted ashore, leading to their veneration in a nine-day festival.<sup>12</sup>

Another variation identifies the Nine Emperor God as a single individual during the Ming dynasty.<sup>13</sup> In 1979, a journalist authored an article identifying the Nine Emperor God as Prince Lu 鲁王, the regent of the Southern Ming (ca. 1644-1662) from 1645-1651. When Prince Lu travelled south to join Zheng Chenggong's 郑成功 (1624-1662) campaign against the Manchu invaders, Zheng was said to have drowned him in cold blood. Witnesses to Zheng's treachery fled to Southeast Asia, where they honoured Prince Lu as the Nine Emperor God. The absence of images of the deity is attributed to his body being submerged, leading to representation by a spirit tablet. During the festival, a censer representing the deity is believed to rise from the ocean and is received by devotees on the shore.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, contemporaneous accounts suggest the 'Nine Emperor God' was a coded name for Zheng Chenggong himself. In these retellings, Zheng visited Zhangzhou and Quanzhou in Fujian, aided by Shaolin monks to coordinate his forces against the Qing dynasty. As a wanted man, he was shielded by a canopy upon arrival and escorted to a temple's secret room, where he planned his campaigns against the Qing. This room inspired the Inner Palaces in Nine Emperor Gods temples.<sup>15</sup>

The prominence of these diverse stories indicates three key points. Firstly, they provide an aetiology of the festival's unique ritual traditions and why the Nine Emperor Gods manifested in the form of a censer that must be enshrined within an Inner Palace. Many of these older Nine Emperor Gods temples in Southeast Asia lack imagery of the Nine Emperor Gods. Unlike most Chinese religious followings, where deities are represented by physical images or paintings, many Nine Emperor Gods temples venerate the deities through a spirit tablet, or in the case of the Ampang Nan Tian Gong, a piece of paper inscribed with the words 'Nine Emperor Gods' in the temple's Inner Palace. Some temples do not even have a permanent spirit tablet, or characters dedicated to these deities for devotees to worship. Instead, they maintain a permanently enclosed Inner Palace within their grounds, which can only be worshipped by devotees kneeling at its threshold. This practice has been rationalised by several of the accounts mentioned above, whether it is due to the deities' decapitation, their bodies being lost at sea, or the need to maintain their anonymised identities in the face of prying eyes from the Qing authorities.

The Ampang Nan Tian Gong's version also accounts for why the festival resembles a funeral, with its white dress code, including the covering of the head in white (the de facto colour of mourning and death). In this regard, because red is a celebratory colour, this may account for why Nine Emperor Gods temples prefer the yellow colour scheme. Additionally, 'yellow' 黄 serves as a homonym for 'emperor' 皇. These accounts sought to explain why the festival

has features that make it unique from other Chinese deity festivals.

Secondly, many of these stories are connected with anti-Qing and Ming loyalist tropes, which overlap with practices of various mutual aid societies in Southeast Asia. These societies, prevalent among the Chinese in Southeast Asia, predicated their rituals, iconographies, and practices somewhat on the collective ideal of overthrowing the Manchus and restoring the last Ming royal descendant to the throne. Indeed, a special set of couplets commonly displayed in many Nine Emperor Gods temples consists of four consecutive characters made up of the characters 'sun' and 'moon'; when placed together, they spell out the character 'Ming' – a hidden reference to the Ming dynasty and to loyalist projects for its restoration.

Finally, the persistence of these ritual traditions indicates that localised religious practices remain a powerful source of the festival's longevity and association with Chinese identities in the context of Southeast Asia and southeastern China. Their repetition suggests that the identities of these Nine Emperor Gods temples, and observers' understanding of the festival and who the Nine Emperor Gods are, are predicated upon the historical experiences, memories, and contemporary situations of the wider Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, as well as their connections to and interactions with historical and contemporary China.

### Conclusion

The Nine Emperor Gods Festival in Southeast Asia serves as a poignant reflection of the Chinese communities' cultural adaptation and resilience, and of the historical imaginaries and memories connecting those communities to China and especially their ancestral regions in southern China. Rooted in rich historical narratives and deeply intertwined with the region's political economy, the festival's unique rituals and traditions underscore a collective identity shaped by a blend of reverence, resistance, and remembrance. The persistence and evolution of these practices highlight the enduring significance of localised religious traditions in maintaining cultural continuities and identities. By honouring the Nine Emperor Gods, the overseas Chinese reaffirm their historical ties and shared heritage, including cultural and historical connections to China, while simultaneously asserting a distinct identity within the diverse sociocultural landscape of Southeast Asia.

Esmond Chuah Meng Soh

is a PhD student with the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge. Email: sohcmesmond@gmail.com

Koh Keng is Assistant Professor in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Email: kohkw@ntu.edu.sg

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# Chinese Folk on Flimsy Grounds

Wang Jiabao

**In contemporary China, the museum is commonly viewed as a repository of knowledge and a site for educating the public. As an official institution, the information on display is rarely questioned or authenticated, but is rather accepted as indisputable fact. By critically analysing the exhibits in the Chinese Folk Art Museum in the Majie village of Baofeng county, Henan province, I hope to demonstrate how the historicity and folkness of Chinese performing arts are constructed through largely fragmentary – and sometimes mistaken – narratives, thus painting an image of an apolitical China.**

the historical density of *quyi* and subtly attributes the operation of the Fair to the motivations of the commoners in order to portray a depoliticised China, as I will show in the following discussion.

## An ancient folk

Walking into the museum, visitors begin their tour on the first floor in a prescribed order through three sequential sections: (1) *Overview of Chinese Folk Art*, (2) *Brief History of Chinese Folk Art*, and finally, (3) *Significance of Folk Art in Chinese Art History*. All information is narrated through texts and pictures. Despite having no archaeological artifacts as historical evidence, the exhibit strives to highlight two central points: the long history of *quyi* and its roots in *minjian* 民间 (“folk”). But both of them are inconclusive, as the first point is supplied with speculative statements, while the second one is supported with histories indicating exactly the opposite – namely, that *quyi* was more elite than folk.

The ‘long history’ narrative starts from the first section, where one learns that *quyi* can be dated back to “ancient times” and “later thrived in small tea houses and wine shops and gradually became a culture inherited by people of all generations.” It continues in the second section, beginning with a statement that “the origin of *quyi* can be traced back to the old age, but little of its history can be corroborated.” Following this is a specific remark that no document can substantiate the existence of *quyi* before the Han Dynasty. However, at this very point, the museum does present sources – such as *gumeng shuochang* 瞽矇说唱 (musician’s oral storytelling

(206 BC–589), *baixi* 百戏 (hundred shows) is introduced as testimony to the emergence of folk performing arts. This reference is supposed to illustrate how *quyi* is rooted in *minjian*. But as no further details are offered here to explain what *baixi* was, it is difficult to discern what exactly constitutes its folkness. According to Zhao, *baixi* refers to “variety entertainment consisting of music, song and dance, acrobatics, comic skits, circus games, martial arts, magic tricks and so forth,”<sup>2</sup> popular between the Han (206 BC–AD 220) and the Six Dynasties (220–589). They were performed for commoners in public squares, apart from for nobles in courtyards, a royal palace, or a palatial mansion.<sup>3</sup> To this extent, one may find some affinities between the folkness of *quyi* and the audience and the venue of *baixi* performances. It is later explained that *quyi* had matured since the Tang Dynasty (618–907), and subsequently, due to the ever-growing urbanisation during the Song Dynasty (960–1279), street theatres facilitated the development of these entertainment activities. Here, performing in street theatres is specifically regarded as a reflection of “the state of *minjian*.”

The narratives of the *quyi* history from the Jin and Yuan to the Qing Dynasty in the museum further stress an increased appreciation and consumption of popular culture in the society and the changes in *quyi*. It is implied that new performing art forms such as *zaju* 杂剧 (variety theatre), *shuoshu* 说书 (storytelling), and *sanqu* 散曲 (song poetry) became popular at both court and among the populace in the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234) and the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). The Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) witnessed another peak point of *quyi* as print technology greatly facilitated the dissemination of *quyi*, dramas, and vernacular literature, satisfying the popular demand for entertainment. During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), given that many performing arts absorbed local dialects, music, and customs, distinctive regional genres proliferated, from rural countryside to urban areas. A multitude of repertoires have survived until the present.

Admittedly, delineating an exhaustive history across centuries is a challenging task. However, to categorise *quyi* as folk art is problematic. First, they were not defined as the art of the folk; rather, from the Han to the Qing Dynasty, they were performed for the folk – in this context, the commoners and later the urban dwellers – and in public places outside of the imperial court and in urban areas. But *quyi* was never exclusive to the folk as performances also took place in the imperial court. In this sense, *quyi* could have been called ‘court art’ as well. Second, if the popular base is one of the core criteria to qualify *quyi* as folk art, the dating of *quyi* to the pre-Han period becomes rather misleading. It appears to merely insinuate a lengthier version of the *quyi* history. Apart from that, the contents of the exhibit do not explain the direct conceptual relationship between *quyi* and folk art. The two are conflated on an epistemological level through an arbitrary usage of *minjian* to reframe *quyi*. Even the name of the museum is translated into English as ‘Chinese Folk Art Museum’ instead of a more literal ‘Chinese Storytelling Art Museum.’

performance) and *paiyou biaoan* 俳優表演 (actor’s entertainment performance) of the pre-Qin period, which served to advise and entertain emperors – to indicate that there are common artistic attributes between *quyi* and the pre-Qin performances. Such unapologetic description relies on visitors’ ability to imagine the historical depth of *quyi* without any direct evidence. More importantly, neither their historical functions nor the context of the imperial court could firmly verify that *quyi* is rooted in *minjian*. In connecting *quyi* to earlier forms of oral storytelling and entertainment performances, the museum is able to articulate *quyi*’s antiquity on somewhat flimsy grounds.

As one moves onto the *quyi* of the Han and the Northern and Southern Dynasties



Fig. 2: Leaders’ Care section in the Chinese Folk Art Museum (Photo by author, 2017).

The whole history of Chinese *quyi* is also conveniently truncated. While the exhibit briefly mentions that performing arts were deployed as a medium of propaganda for anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist wars during the era of Republican China, how they served to legitimise the political power of the Chinese Communist Party after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is completely unacknowledged. According to one of the curatorial team members, the reason why the exhibit excludes the history of *quyi* after the PRC was established in 1949 is that there is a lack of visual and textual materials due to wars. But this justification can be easily rejected, because there exists a plethora of published materials and sources on the *quyi* history during the PRC era.<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of the intention behind the curation, the partial rendition of history has political implications. From the perspective of an audience, the exhibition chronicles a narrative rooted purely in the sentiments of the folk, as if devoid of any political contestation. The unconsidered obviation of *quyi* after 1949 encompasses three major historical periods. Under the Maoist regime, performances that contained 'superstitious' and 'vulgar' contents were reformed to convey socialist policies and values, thereby consolidating the Communist ideology. In the reform era, those performed in rural areas were also used as soft power to build a presumably socialist spiritual civilisation and a harmonious society.<sup>5</sup> In the new millennium, many of them were inscribed on the *National Representative Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage*.<sup>6</sup> The omission of such context in the museum could be a strategy to ensure that the exhibit is not politically charged. The seemingly apolitical past of *quyi* in ancient China thus fabricates a romantic notion of folkness, one that connects all Chinese people to this shared culture.

### A contemporary folk

The troubling curation does not end on the first floor. The long history of the Fair exhibited on the second floor can be called into question as well. For instance, according to the timeline that chronicles the history of the Fair in the second section (*Majie Folk Art Fair*), the evidence that justifies the materiality of the Fair is circumstantial, as it simply points to the construction of the Guangyan Buddhist Temple in the Majie village in the Yuan Dynasty (in 1315) and its subsequent restoration in the Ming Dynasty (in 1496). We can also observe that the other narrative in the first section (*Origin of Majie Folk Art Fair*), which draws the connection between the Fair and the Jingkang Incident (1126-1127) during the Northern Song Dynasty, is utilised to re-periodise the history of the Fair. It is recounted that during that period, "Majie area served as the assembling point for performing artists who were seen as an important force resisting the invasion of the Jin armies," and hence, by inference, the existence of the Fair. As such, the chronology of the Fair can be further stretched to the Song Dynasty. Certainly, the latter narrative can lengthen the history of the Fair. But neither Buddhist temple nor the Jingkang Incident can be proved to be relevant to the Fair. Unrelated events seem to have been inserted to corroborate the chronology to reinforce the facticity of the emergence of the Fair.

Following that, the historical events indicating that the Fair thrived in the Qing Dynasty (1863), Republican China (1928), and PRC (1963-1965) are also fragmentary. It was not until 1980 that the documentation of the Fair became relatively consistent. Major events and achievements are recorded annually in the timeline that terminates in 2014, when the museum was officially opened. Exhaustively listed in a chronological order, they mainly focus on officials' inspections and supervisions, scholars' research visits, and renowned professional storytelling artists' performances. Such an emphasis on the authorities' efforts in developing the Fair in the past four decades is elaborated in the last two sections. In particular, *Inheritance and Development* (*chuancheng*



Fig. 3: Photos of Quyi Artists in the Chinese Folk Art Museum (Photo by author, 2017).

*yu hongyang* 传承与弘扬) highlights new activities such as the 'Performance Auction' invented by the Baofeng government particularly for the purpose of safeguarding the Fair by providing a market.<sup>7</sup> This is because, owing to the decreasing demand of performing arts around the early 2000s, many performers have stopped performing. By arranging the local government-owned work units and local enterprises to bid the performances, the auction was intended to show the possibility for the performers to sell their performances, thus encouraging them to continue performing at the Fair to keep it alive. This section also features the performances of renowned professional artists. As I was told, inviting celebrated artists to perform at the Fair serves to stimulate a celebrity effect to attract more visitors.<sup>8</sup> The last section, *Leader's Care* (*lingdao guanhuo* 领导关怀), reserves an exclusive place to present the encouragement and support of the Fair by officials at different levels. Visitors are expected to encounter a wall of memorabilia consisting of framed calligraphic works written by eminent government officials, some of which are written for the Fair, whereas others represent officials' endorsements of performing arts and the Fair [Fig. 2].

Compared with the exhibit on the first floor, the Fair is curated with a strong governmental overtone. It is not common to expose the 'invisible hand' of the government operating behind heritage conservation efforts in a museum setting. Even the presence of celebrated professional artists represents a certain officialness, as these artists occupy positions in state-funded organisations such as the Chinese Quyi Artists Association. This is probably because the available materials gathered by the local curatorial team largely come from the Compilation Committee of Local Records of Baofeng county, whose methodology directs the archivists to document the history of the authorities.<sup>9</sup> The local curatorial team explained to me that the Fair's sustainability relies heavily on the leaders' educational background, especially that of the head of Baofeng county and the Party Secretary. It seems that the leaders are entirely responsible for determining whether the Fair deserves any attention.<sup>10</sup> The Fair would have more events and activities if the leaders themselves were keen on reinvigorating performing arts.

But this has an unavoidable consequence: the showcase of a folk art fair becomes that of authorities. If we look at the part in the exhibition that has less traces of government involvement, including the photographs of folk performing artists in the second section, we can conclude that the folkness of the Fair is constituted by the status of these performing artists who are not officially affiliated nor practicing *quyi* as a profession. They make up the majority of the artists at the Fair. In these photos,

they participated in activities like *xieshu* 写书 (selling performances) and *liangshu* 亮书 (showcasing performances) [Fig. 3]. The photos demonstrate little sense of time. Their captions do not suggest when the photos were taken and by whom. They are snapshots of arbitrary moments collated in a montage to give an impression of historical depth and to imply the unchanging state of the Fair. While the snapshots showcase the folk performing artists' participation in the Fair, the Fair's history as represented through textual descriptions of the timeline prioritises officials, researchers, and professional performing artists' contribution to the Fair's development, all of which undermine the primary role of folk performing artists in sustaining the Fair. By underlining government officials' supervision in the museum exhibit, the officials become the pillar of the Fair, ensuring its continuity. Folk performing artists, on the other hand, appear to be the group of people with more participatory power in making the Fair a folk phenomenon, yet with less decisive power in determining its course of history.

In 2016, as I was conducting my fieldwork, I encountered a local resident who complained to me how recklessly dictatorial the local government was in requisitioning her farmland to ready the field for the 2016 Majie Folk Art Fair. As the Fair is believed to have been traditionally organised on the grain field, the local government ordered the local farmers to empty the land with only 'traditional crops' such as grain allowed to be planted. Many farmers refused to cooperate. They planted pear trees to protect their land from being requisitioned since only by doing so could they prevent their land from being trampled by the crowd during the Fair. Unfortunately, during my visit the pear trees were already uprooted by the local authorities.

However, to my surprise, the farmer mentioned above changed her attitude the moment I told her I would visit the Chinese Folk Art Museum. She expressed her fondness for the museum and told me that she had visited it numerous times and had learnt the history of the Fair.<sup>11</sup> Her discontent with the local government co-existed perfectly with her sense of pride about the Fair, derived directly from her experience in the museum. She is not an exceptional case. Many local visitors were impressed by the exhibits. Before visiting the museum, they knew very little about the Fair's extensive history. But a sense of pride is immediately evoked after visiting the exhibition as they learn that such ancient tradition originates from their hometown and has since received official acknowledgement. In a way, the museum becomes a space that inculcates a sense of 'imagined community' as the visitors learn to become part of the collective folk, sharing identical pasts and futures. The authorities' callous handling of the Fair behind the scene and the displeasure of the

local farmers in the requisition of land are all but concealed.

Connecting the locality to a longer history of ancient and Republican China re-structures the Fair's fragmented past; in return, the Fair serves as an evidence to prove that *quyi* is in actuality locally grounded. The museum juxtaposes the ancient and linear past of *quyi* with the fragmented present of a contemporary folk art fair to compose a cultural imaginary devoid of any political tension. By all means, this is a reflection of the current ideological emphasis on 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,' which leaves no room for any reminiscence of the politicisation of culture prevalent during wartime and socialist China.

#### Wang Jiabao

is a Lecturer at the Faculty of Creative Arts, Universiti Malaya. Her research focuses on the genealogy of the discourse of 'folk' or *minjian* in modern and contemporary China. Email: wangjiabao@um.edu.my

#### Notes

- 1 According to the museum exhibit, the folk art (*quyi*) in this context refers to "all forms of storytelling art, developed from folk oral literature and the art of singing... with a popular support base," and its contents "reflect the bittersweet moments of people's life of over a thousand years."
- 2 Zhao Xiaohuan, *Chinese Theatre: An Illustrated History through Nuoxi and Mulianxi* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 73.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 73-74.
- 4 For example, Cai Yuanli and Wu Wenke, *Zhongguo quyishi* (*The History of Quyi in China*) (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1998).
- 5 For more information about the Majie Folk Art Fair, see Wang Jiabao, "Folk Soft Power in Nation-State Building: The Political Use of Folk Culture in Post-Mao China," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2023.2208162>.
- 6 "Guojiaji feiwuzhiwenhuayichan daibiao minglu" (National Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage), Intangible Heritage of China, accessed September 22, 2023, <https://www.ihchina.cn/project.html#target1>.
- 7 Personal conversation with a local performing artist, December 31, 2017.
- 8 Personal conversation with the local curatorial team, December 21, 2017. The renowned professional artists invited include, for example, Jiang Kun and Ma Ji.
- 9 The curatorial team's method is to exhibit anything that is relevant to the Fair, according to my personal conversation with the local curatorial team, July 6, 2019.
- 10 Personal conversation with the local curatorial team, January 8, 2018.
- 11 This conversation took place on 1 January 2016 during my first visit to the Fair.

# For God or for the Emperor?

## A Flemish Jesuit at the 17th-Century Chinese Court

Patrick Vanden Berghe

Last year marked the 400th anniversary of the birthday of the Jesuit missionary Ferdinand Verbiest, S.J. (1623-1688). Verbiest was born in Pittem, Belgium, and to mark the occasion, the old Ferdinand Verbiest Visitor's Center in this small village in Flanders was turned into an Experience Center where visitors are immersed in the life and work of Verbiest. By refurbishing the space and through the inclusion of interactive functions, the new Experience Center provides a more realistic image of the period and environment in which this Belgian Jesuit lived. The objective is to create wider interest in Verbiest, and to keep his legacy alive. This is done, for instance, through copies of plans, drawings, and texts made by Verbiest. One of the most noteworthy pieces in the exposition is a small-scale model of Verbiest's 'mobile' considered to be the first 'car'.



As readers may know, Verbiest was instrumental in bringing European astronomy to the 17th-century court of the Chinese Qing dynasty (1644-1912). But during his long stay at the court of the Kangxi Emperor Xuanye 玄燁 (1654-1722), Verbiest's influence stretched further. In the rear part of the Ferdinand Verbiest Experience Center, Verbiest is presented as a 'homo universalis', with exceptional engineering qualities.

### The early years of Ferdinand Verbiest

Ferdinand Verbiest was born on October 9, as the son of a bailiff and tax collector for the local authorities.<sup>1</sup> Between 1634 and 1640 Verbiest studied with the Jesuits, first in Bruges and later in Kortrijk. In 1640 he attended the Collegium Liliense in Leuven, where he studied philosophy and mathematics. He soon interrupted his studies and entered the Jesuit Novitiate, where he formally joined the Jesuit Order on September 2, 1641. Already during his first year, he applied for the South American mission, but this was refused. Verbiest finished his studies at the Jesuit College of Leuven and returned to his former college in Kortrijk, where he studied as a *repetens* (a position in which a student repeats his knowledge under the supervision of a tutor).

In 1647 he received permission to go to the mission in Peru, but upon arrival in Cádiz, he learned that this permission had been withdrawn at the last minute. A disappointed Verbiest returned to his home country and was appointed professor of Latin and Greek at the Jesuit College in Brussels. Five years later he was selected to attend courses for his doctorate in theology at the Collegio Romano in Rome. In April 1655, Verbiest defended his doctoral dissertation in Sevilla, after which he returned to Rome. By now it had become clear to Verbiest that his appeals to be sent to the West Indies would remain fruitless, and he became attracted to the idea of joining the Jesuit missions in China. Therefore, he spent some time in Genoa, where missionaries for the Far East were prepared. Verbiest received training in mathematics, which was then considered the most important subject for these kinds of missions.

A first attempt to reach Lisbon – from where Verbiest and other missionaries would set sail for China – was hindered when their boat was attacked by pirates. Verbiest was held captive but finally succeeded in escaping. He then decided to travel overland to Lisbon, but he arrived too late for the spring departure of the fleet bound for the East. He accepted a temporary position as a professor of mathematics at the Colégio das Artes in Coimbra. Finally, on April 4, 1657, Verbiest and 16 other Jesuit missionaries left Lisbon. After a traumatic overseas journey and a stopover in Goa, they arrived in Macau on July 17, 1658.

Subsequently, he was sent from Macau to the Xi'an Mission in Shaanxi Province. Verbiest would not stay long in his newly appointed post, as in 1660 the Shunzhi Emperor Fulin 福臨 (1638-1661) requested that he continue on to Beijing. The main instigator for this move was Father Johann Adam Schall von Bell, S.J. (1582-1666), who had been sent to Beijing to continue the work of the deceased Johann Schreck, S.J. (1576-1630) on the reform of the Chinese calendar. Schall von Bell succeeded in modifying the Chinese calendar and compiling the Chongzhen calendar (named after the last emperor of the Ming Dynasty, the Chongzhen Emperor, Zhu Youjian 朱由檢, 1611-1644). After the Ming-Qing Transition in 1644, Schall von Bell gained access to the newly installed Shunzhi Emperor and became one of his trusted counsellors. Feeling that his physical abilities were slowly failing, he looked for a replacement and finally decided on Ferdinand Verbiest. Verbiest left Xi'an on May 9, 1660 and arrived at the imperial city of Beijing on June 9.<sup>2</sup>

### The Jesuits and the importance of the Chinese calendar

In Europe, Jesuits were known for their deep knowledge of mathematics and astronomy. This expertise gave them a favourable position in China, where the emperor was keen to get access to new

ideas. But Jesuits felt that this advantage was not always enough to be totally accepted by Chinese society. In order to be successful in China, the Jesuits realised they needed to adapt their beliefs and practices to better accommodate their potential converts.<sup>3</sup> Another important element in the success of the Jesuits in China was their technological prowess, as they proved to be very good designers and builders of instruments.

At the same time the Jesuits understood very well that their unparalleled position also depended on sharing European knowledge with the emperor. The key element was the Chinese calendar and its defaults. The calendar problem stems from the fact that a year does not contain an exact number of months, and neither does a year nor a month contain an exact number of days. So, there are intercalations in every calendar. In Europe, ten days had been skipped in October 1582 in order to bring the calendar into agreement with celestial phenomena. But in China, it was about more than fixing the vernal equinox or holidays. The earth had to be in harmony with the heavens at all times. This was no mere superstition; rather, it reflected the view that agriculture depended on astronomical data. The emperor played a fundamental role in this, as he was the link between heaven and earth and was responsible for the harmony between the two. To carry out his decisions correctly, the accuracy of the calendar was critical. Thus, the Chinese sought the best scientists, even if they had to look far beyond the borders of the empire.

Fig. 1 (above): *Les Astronomes* [The Astronomers], Beauvais Tapestry Manufactory (c. 1697-1705). (Image in the public domain, available from Getty Research Institute: <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103OSJ>)

Fig. 2 (right): *The Kunyu Quantu*, version of 1674, (Image in the public domain, available on Wikimedia Commons: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/32/Kunyu\\_Quantu\\_of\\_Ferdinand\\_Verbiest\\_1674.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/32/Kunyu_Quantu_of_Ferdinand_Verbiest_1674.jpg))



### Troubles for Verbiest and the Jesuit Mission

The first years of Ferdinand Verbiest in China were not easy. One of his fellow Jesuits, Gabriel de Magalhães, S.J. (1610-1677), was imprisoned on suspicion of bribery. Meanwhile Schall von Bell endured attacks from Chinese and Muslim astronomers opposing his Western methods.

On April 20, 1664, Schall suffered a stroke and was barely able to move or speak. On September 15 of that year one state official, Yang Guangxian 楊光先 (?-1669), presented a petition to the Board of Rites charging Schall and his companions with treachery, preaching an abominable religion, and teaching false astronomical methods. Schall



was arrested along with Ferdinand Verbiest, the two antagonists de Magalhães and Buglio, and a number of Chinese Christians associated with the Astronomical Bureau. After a lengthy trial before a court in Beijing, the prisoners were handed over to the Minister of Justice for sentencing. On February 4, 1665, three judges ratified the death sentence that had been given to Schall, only they changed the method from strangulation to the most barbarous of all deaths known to Chinese law: slowly cutting the victim to pieces with a sharp sword.

For the next two months the prisoners were contemplating their fate when a series of remarkable events, including the apparition of a comet and an earthquake, occurred that spared their lives. As a result, an amnesty was granted on April 19, which included Ferdinand Verbiest, Buglio, de Magalhães, and one of the Chinese Christian officials. Four days later, Adam Schall's death sentence was commuted. He remained in chains until, so it seemed, nature intervened once more: on April 29, fire raged in the imperial palace, where some forty rooms burnt out.

Adam Schall was released and allowed to return to his home. Nevertheless, five Chinese Christians from the Institute of Astronomy were beheaded, and 30 missionaries who had taken up residence in Beijing were banished to southern China. Only Verbiest and four other missionaries were permitted to remain outside the capital. However, Verbiest and Schall von Bell would not leave the capital anymore. The two of them stayed at the Jesuit residence where Schall von Bell would die on August 15, 1666. Yang Guangxian succeeded as the head astronomer at the court.

### Beyond astronomy: on cannons and cars

Four years later, after heavy disputes, Verbiest managed to prove the mistakes in the calendars drawn by the Mathematical Bureau. As a result, Yang Guangxian was

replaced by Verbiest, who started the process of replacing the old instruments in the observatory with six new ones, thus creating an observatory based on the ideas of Tycho Brahe.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Verbiest was appointed Director of the Astronomical Bureau, responsible for the calculation of the lunar calendar and for teaching the 'Western Rule' to the students of the Bureau.

Soon, the Kangxi Emperor would ask Verbiest's assistance in matters related to mechanics, hydraulics, ballistics, and kinetics. One of Verbiest's most noteworthy realisations as an engineer was his success in transporting four massive granite blocks over the Lugou Bridge (also known as "The Marco Polo Bridge", spanning the Yongding River 永定河, appr. 15 kms southwest of Beijing). To accomplish this, he used a combination of men (instead of horses) and windlasses, which helped confirm his reputation with the emperor as a man capable of many things.

More controversially, Verbiest assisted in drawing the much-needed cannons for use in the emperor's war with insurgents in various parts of his empire. In 1673 Wu Sangui 吳三桂 (1612-1678) the general who was in charge of the garrison of Yunnan province, rose in rebellion with the purpose of disrupting the vast Chinese empire. Geng Jingzhong 耿精忠 (1644-1682) and Shang Zhixin 尚之信 (1636-1680) answered his call to rebellion. Soon half of China's territory was swept with warfare. The emperor realised that in order to repress the rebellion, the Qing army would require mobile and agile cannons, and he asked Verbiest to take part in the casting of light cannons.

Of the total of 905 cannons manufactured during the Kangxi reign, more than half were cast under Verbiest's supervision.<sup>5</sup> He presented a model of a wooden cannon, which consisted of an iron barrel, of which the mouth was equipped with a bronze ring, while a bronze ball was added to the rear part. The whole was covered by painted wood. Verbiest also cast 'Dutch cannons', named after the cannons that had been imported



Fig. 5: A small-scale reproduction of Verbiest's car, made by students from the School for Technics (VTI), Tiel, Belgium. (Photo courtesy of Gemeente Pittem, 2023)

from Holland in 1604. But these cannons proved to be too heavy for fast warfare. The wooden model was successful, and between 1674 to 1676 Verbiest oversaw the production of 132 wooden cannons, followed by another 320 cannons. In 1681, Verbiest tested a new type of cannon. To meet the high standards set by the emperor, Verbiest made numerous calculations for measuring distance, and for improving accuracy and mobility. In order to get the most out of these new cannons, Verbiest designed new four-wheeled chariots to transport the cannons and support them while being fired.

His success in casting cannons earned Verbiest the title of Engineer. In 1682, Verbiest wrote a (now lost) book, drawing on his experiences and explaining the theory and method of firing cannons. The technique, shape and solid body of Verbiest's light cannons were unparalleled and improved only much later, showing that Verbiest was creatively devoted to the casting of low-weight and easily transportable cannons.

Verbiest's engineering and technical skills are also apparent in his design of the first-ever self-driving mobile (or 'car'), meant to divert the emperor who had a keen interest in technique and engineering. Verbiest's description in his *Astronomia Europaea* (Dillingen, 1687) contains the earliest dated technical description of an automotive device.<sup>6</sup> Verbiest did not want to present a mere model: he designed a vehicle consisting of a number of parts with a definite function. The most impressive part of his machine was that it used mechanical power, containing within itself the means of propulsion. For this, Verbiest used a small steam turbine, positioned on a light wooden chassis.<sup>7</sup> He combined older scientific inventions and knowledge, applying his original mind and technical skills. This shows how he was able to bring together various aspects of science and engineering. The most important elements of his car were made of steel, built on a light wooden chassis.

Many sources have defined Verbiest's machine to be the first car. Even today car constructors and websites on car mechanics refer to this invention as the first self-running car. Recent experiments have shown that, with some safety adjustments, Verbiest's automotive was capable of running by itself.<sup>8</sup> Although it does not match the exact definition of a modern car, this machine was only one of Verbiest's many technological triumphs.

While Verbiest only consented to working for the emperor because he believed this would help him receive permission to spread Christianity, this caused much fuz among some of his fellow brothers, who accused him of devoting too much time to worldly affairs, of receiving and distributing presents, and of accepting non-religious titles.

Verbiest fell from his horse in 1687 and, as a consequence, was left in severe pain. He would never fully recover and died on January 28, 1688. He was succeeded as the chief mathematician and astronomer of the Chinese empire by another Belgian Jesuit, Antoine Thomas, S.J. (1644-1709). Verbiest was buried in the Jesuits' Zhalan Cemetery in Beijing, near other Jesuits including Matteo Ricci and Johann Adam Schall von Bell. His funeral was paid for by the emperor himself.

### Importance of Verbiest for Chinese science

In retrospect one might conclude that Verbiest promulgated outdated knowledge to

China. This, however, requires nuance. First and foremost, he tried to get as many books and other scientific writings from Europe to China as possible, with varying success. One problem was that even in Europe, the distribution of new scientific ideas did not evolve very fast. During Verbiest's lifetime, some universities refused to teach the new insights of Copernicus and others. Moreover, of course, there was the enormous distance between Europe and China, which made the transfer of knowledge enormously difficult. Shortly after Verbiest left for China, numerous instruments were developed in the fields of time measurement, angle measurement, and optics. It took decades for these inventions to reach China, time that the emperor did not grant Verbiest.

While most biographical notes on Verbiest stress his importance for the knowledge Chinese astronomers gained from him, we should not overlook the other fields in which his contributions were far from trifle. In fact, his importance was not only scientific but also technical. While in many publications he is called a scientist, it is more appropriate to label Verbiest as an engineer.

#### Patrick Vanden Berghe

(M.A. English literature) is head librarian of the Public Library of Pittem and an independent researcher. His interest focusses on Ancient South-East Asian history. He participated in the restyling of the Ferdinand Verbiest Experience Center in Pittem (Belgium). Email: [patrickvandenbergh@gmx.net](mailto:patrickvandenbergh@gmx.net)

#### Notes

- Most of the biographical data on Ferdinand Verbiest were taken from Veerle De Vos, *Alles onder de hemel (Everything under the sky)*, (Kalmthout, Pelckmans, 2023)
- For an account of this journey by Verbiest himself, see the letters he wrote to the Flandro-Belgian provincial of the Jesuit Order, in: Noël Golvers, *Letters of a Peking Jesuit. The correspondence of Ferdinand Verbiest, S.J. (1623-1688)*, (Leuven, Ferdinand Verbiest Institute, 2017), p. 139-142
- Shu Liguang, Ferdinand Verbiest and the casting of cannons in the Qing dynasty, in: *Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688): Jesuit Missionary, Scientist, Engineer and Diplomat* ed. John W. Witek, S.J., (Nettetal, Steyler Verlag, 1994), p. 227-244
- Very nice drawings of the complete observatory and the individual instruments can be found in: H. Bosmans S.J., *Ferdinand Verbiest, Directeur de l'observatoire de Peking*, (Louvain, 1942), p. 60 ff.
- Shu Liguang, Ferdinand Verbiest and the casting of cannons in the Qing dynasty, in: *Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688): Jesuit Missionary, Scientist, Engineer and Diplomat* ed. John W. Witek, S.J., (Nettetal, Steyler Verlag, 1994), p. 227-244
- Noël Golvers, *The Astronomia Europaea of Ferdinand Verbiest, S.J. (Dillingen, 1687); Text, Translation, Notes and Commentaries*, (Nettetal, Steyler Verlag, 1993), p. 123.
- J. Ditlev Scheel, Precursor from Peking. Meet Ferdinand Verbiest, Seventeenth-century Missionary, Diplomat, Astronomer and Automotive Engineer, in: *Automobile Quarterly*, 23:3 (1985), p. 268-275
- A small-scale model of Verbiest's car can be found in the Ferdinand Verbiest Experience Center. It was made by students from the School for Technics (VTI, Tiel, Belgium) in 2013.

Fig. 3 (right): A colourised portrait of Adam Schall von Bell (c. 1667 CE), the Jesuit missionary and scholar who introduced Ferdinand Verbiest to the Chinese emperor. (Image in public domain, available from Wikimedia Commons)

Fig. 4 (below): Ferdinand Verbiest, represented as a Mandarin and as astronomer. (Image in public domain)





Fig. 1: English map of the ancient Roman Via Egnatia crossing the South of the Balkans. (Image courtesy of Wikimedia user Eric Gaba ["Sting"] and reprinted under Creative Commons license, 2006.

Fig. 2: The whitewashed stone-roofed buildings in the bazaar quarter of Gjirokastra, Albania, retain their original Turkish character. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia user David Stanley and reprinted under Creative Commons license, 2018.

# Exploring the Links Between Albania and Asia: A Historical Journey

Besnik Aliaj and Anila Bejko (Gjika)

## Historical crossroads: A tapestry of exchanges

Albania's history is intrinsically linked to the broader narrative of the Balkans and Asia, highlighting centuries of interconnectedness. This tapestry of exchanges began long before the modern era. Strategic pathways traversed the Balkans throughout history, and what we now know as Albania has long facilitated an array of cultural, economic, and military interactions between East and West.

The origins of these exchanges can be traced back to the eras of Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. Alexander the Great's conquests during the 4th century BCE and the subsequent expansion of the Roman Empire established enduring trade routes that traversed through Albania. These routes became channels for the movement of people, ideas, and commodities, contributing to the vibrant cultural landscape that characterized the region. During that period, the Via Egnatia was a Roman road connecting Dyrrachium (now Durrës) on the Adriatic Sea to Byzantium (now Istanbul) [Fig. 1]. The route served as a vibrant channel for trade between the Roman Empire and the Eastern territories, facilitating the exchange of goods, ideas, and influences between the Mediterranean world and the East. The route has been considered and studied for its military and economic functions as well as for its profound cultural influence, which shaped the intellectual and social landscape of the regions it traversed, including those of present-day Albania. Cities like Apollonia thrived along the Via Egnatia as learning centers, attracting minds from parts of the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup>

This article explores Albania and Asia's lasting and complex relationship, tracing a historical narrative that stretches back thousands of years. From ancient trade routes to the lasting impact of the Ottoman Empire and the complex dynamics of the Cold War period, Albania's narrative is knitted with cultural, economic, and diplomatic exchanges that have left an indelible mark on its identity. In this piece, through traveling among Eastern influences that have shaped Albanian society, culture, and development, we bring some insights into Albania's distinctive role as a bridge between Europe and Asia.

## The Ottoman era: A fusion of cultures

For five centuries, the Ottoman Empire significantly shaped Albania's cultural and demographic landscape, blending European and Asian influences. This period introduced a lasting imprint of Islamic religion and traditions into Albanian society alongside its predominantly Catholic and Orthodox Christian communities. Due to its geostrategic position, Albania served as a bridge between the East and the West, absorbing and assimilating various cultural, religious, and economic influences.

The Ottoman Empire's expansion into the Balkans began in the 14th century and culminated in the conquest of Albania in the late 15th century. During this period, significant changes occurred in Albanian society as the Ottomans introduced their governance systems and cultural traditions.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between Albanians and their Ottoman rulers was complex, marked by periods of coexistence and resistance. While some Albanians embraced Ottoman rule and rose to positions of power within the empire, others actively resisted, forming alliances with European states.<sup>3</sup> This historical period ultimately paved the way for the proclamation of Albanian independence and the establishment of a modern state. While some scholars suggest that the

Despite the decline and collapse of the Ottoman Empire, its influence on Albanian society and culture remains prominent, evident in language, architecture, and cuisine. Islamic customs and Arabic vocabulary integrated into the language reflect the enduring impact of that era. Mosques, baths (hammams), and Ottoman-style buildings found at UNESCO sites in several cities in Albania, such as Gjirokastra [Fig. 2], Berati, Tirana, and Kruja, serve as reminders of this cultural fusion.

## The Cold War period: A shift in global alignment

Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Albania entered a new era characterized by rising nationalism, which soon became entangled with broader 20th-century geopolitical struggles. Albania aligned itself with the communist bloc during the Cold War era, establishing ties with the Soviet Union (until 1960) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) (until 1978).

After World War II, Albania embraced communism under the leadership of Enver Hoxha (1908-1985). It joined the Soviet bloc, aligned with the communist ideology, and sought support from Moscow. This alignment led to intense cooperation with the Soviet Union, with Albania receiving economic aid, military assistance, and cultural exchanges. The Soviet Union supported Albania's industrial development, providing expertise and resources. In many Albanian cities (e.g., Tirana, Elbasan, Berat, Durrës, etc.), there were neighborhoods with Russian or Chinese experts who helped develop Albania's economy, industry, and military. About 6000 Chinese technicians and engineers came to Albania to assist in the

Albanian national identity partially emerged as a response to Ottoman dominance, its formation is a complex phenomenon shaped not only by the Ottoman Empire's presence, but also by broader historical and cultural dynamics in the Balkans.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 4: "We are real friends". Commemorative recordings of songs about Albanian-China friendship made during the 1967 visit to China of the Albanian art troupe "With a Pick in One Hand and a Rifle in the Other." 2019. Image available courtesy of Sinopsis.

expertise in fields like agriculture, industry, and military technology [Fig. 3].

Ismail Kadare (1936-2024), one of Albania's most celebrated authors and a crucial figure for understanding the country's complex historical and cultural tapestry, particularly its interactions with Asian influences, had also partly studied at the Institute of World Literature "Maxim Gorky" in Moscow during 1958-1960. His work encapsulates the nuances of Albania's identity as it transitioned from Ottoman rule through the communist era, with each phase shaping its cultural landscape. From *The Castle* (1974) and *The Palace of Dreams* (1981) to the *Winter of Great Solitude* (1971) and *The Concert* (1978),<sup>8</sup> Kadare [Fig. 4] captures the intricate relationships between Albania and various influences, providing profound insights into the nation's quest for cultural autonomy and identity.<sup>9</sup>

### Navigating the modern world: Balancing relationships and embracing opportunities

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, Albania embraced globalization while maintaining its historical ties with Russia and China. The country is now focused on building relationships and integrating into the global economy, particularly through its pursuit of European Union membership.

Trade ties and cultural cooperation have become key focus areas between Albania and China, while both countries continue to face challenges in overcoming historical and political baggage. The "One Belt, One Road" initiative has fostered increased cooperation between Albania and China, although concerns about the depth of this partnership remain.<sup>10</sup>

Trade between China and Albania has increasingly flourished in the past decade. The import and export rates have intensified despite the distance, differences, and political implications. It is safe to argue that business has a life of its own in China-Albania relations. Bilateral economic ties have grown steadily in the past two decades, but most of the increase was witnessed after the 2008 financial crisis. Indeed, if there is a field where relations are excellent, it is trade.<sup>11</sup> For example, in the overall picture for 2023, Albania's leading trading partners are Italy (29.2%), China (7.9%), Turkey (6.8%), and Greece (6.5%).<sup>12</sup>

The cultural ties have also deepened significantly, reflected in the organization of various exciting initiatives. One highlight was the exhibition "Albanian Authors for China, Chinese Authors for Albania," which opened in Tirana in November 2019 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries, showcasing over 400 translated works, including those of Albanian writer Dritëro Agolli (1931-2017) and Nobel Prize-winning Chinese author Mo Yan (1955). The cultural exchange is not limited to literature; Albanian cinema has also carved a niche in China. The first Albanian film to reach Chinese audiences was *Tana* back in 1959, and the recent screening of *Borxhliu* in 1999 reflects decades of growing interest, with nearly 30 Albanian films now making their way to China. The reasons behind the popularity of Albanian films in China are mainly attributed to the strong alliance between China and Albania during the 1960s and the cultural life configured by socialist internationalism. These films have left an indelible mark on Chinese society, even influencing fashion trends and showcasing

Fig. 6: Still from the Albanian film *Ballë për Ballë (Face to Face)*, 1979. Image accessible at [imdb](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077000/).



how cultural influences can create waves far beyond their context of origin [Fig. 5].<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, Albania's relationship with Russia is characterized by a complex interplay of tensions and collaboration, reflecting the broader geopolitical landscape. Recent years have seen heightened tensions in the Balkans due to Russia's assertiveness on the stage and its involvement in conflicts like the Ukrainian War. Russia's efforts to bolster its regional influence by exploiting historical divides have raised concerns. As a NATO member, Albania has stood alongside allies in denouncing Russian aggression and supporting Ukraine.<sup>14</sup>

Another country in Asia with which Albania keeps good relations, despite their distance and economic differences, is Japan. Albania and Japan have had relations since 1972. After the 1990s Japan offered development assistance to Albania, focusing on infrastructure and disaster relief. Although there have been exchanges, the economic connections remain limited.

More recently, Albania has forged relations with Singapore, focusing mostly on trade and investment interests. Both nations have engaged in discussions, with Singapore showing interest in building partnerships with Albania. They aim to collaborate in sectors like tourism and trade. Albania sees Singapore as a development model due to its prosperity, leading to talks about sharing strategies.

On the other hand, Albania has expanded its international connections further, focusing on the Middle East, India, and Southeast Asia to enhance its cultural influence and attract investments. This approach reflects Albania's ambition to strengthen diplomatic ties, promote collaboration in various sectors, and learn from the experiences of these diverse regions.

### Embracing Asia in education and research

The Albanian educational landscape increasingly embraces Asia in its studies and research, reflecting a growing interest in collaboration and cultural exchange. Higher education institutions such as the University of Tirana and Epoka University are leading this initiative with programs that explore the geopolitics of Asian countries, fostering student exchanges and scholarships with institutions beyond Europe.

POLIS University and Co-PLAN, Institute for Habitat Development, both pioneer innovative approaches to urban planning and development education. POLIS University specializes in architecture, urban planning, and design, emphasizing an interdisciplinary approach. This creates opportunities for strategic partnerships with Asian scholars and practitioners. By integrating theory with practical applications, POLIS aims to prepare students to address contemporary urban challenges while promoting sustainable development.

Meanwhile, Co-PLAN is a prominent research institution dedicated to advancing sustainable urban development in Albania and the Balkans. It focuses on various aspects of urbanism, including planning, governance, and community engagement. Co-PLAN conducts research, offers training, and facilitates projects that promote social and ecological sustainability, drawing valuable insights from global practices to enhance local urban policies and development strategies.

Additionally, Co-PLAN is a member of the River Cities Network,<sup>15</sup> a global initiative focused on ecologically and socially inclusive revitalization of waterways and urban

landscapes. This transdisciplinary network enables local scholars, scientists, and activists to collaborate on river-city case studies, addressing the complex interactions between communities and their rivers.

Through these initiatives, Albania's educational institutions are enriching their curricula and positioning themselves as vital participants in a global dialogue on urban sustainability and cultural exchange.

**Prof. Dr. Besnik Aliaj** is the Rector and one of the founders of POLIS University, Tirana. He holds academic titles in urban design and planning. With 30 years of academic and managerial experience, Prof. Aliaj has taught at several institutions, including the University of Arts in Tirana and Darmstadt University in Germany. Prof. Aliaj is a prominent intellectual in Albania, contributing to public discourse on territorial planning, regionalization, and higher education.  
Email: [besnik\\_aliaj@universitetipolis.edu.al](mailto:besnik_aliaj@universitetipolis.edu.al)

**Anila Bejko (Gjika)** is the Executive Director of Co-PLAN, Institute for Habitat Development. With over 20 years of experience, she specializes in territorial governance, urban and regional development policies, and sustainable development. She also lectures on Regional Planning and Development and Strategic Management at POLIS University.  
Email: [anila\\_gjika@co-plan.org](mailto:anila_gjika@co-plan.org)

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Fig. 4: Sculpted frieze in honor of author Ismail Kadare at Gjirokastra Castle, Gjirokastra, Albania. [Photo courtesy of Wikimedia user Adam Jones and reprinted under Creative Commons license, 2018.]

country's development.<sup>5</sup> They also interacted with local residents, creating mutual respect, and Albanian children exchanged letters with the children from these experts' neighborhoods. Albanian students of our parents' generation were sent to study in the Soviet Union to bring the Soviet culture and ideas back to the country. Sometimes, new families of Albanians and Russians were formed and established back in Albania. These families often suffered due to political divergences with the Soviet Union that became more evident after 1960, and most of them were separated, only to be reunited after the fall of the Berlin Wall in the 1990s.

Though the relationship between Albania and Russia is complex, oscillating between periods of tension and collaboration, it was short-lived. Official diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1945, and over the years, relationships strengthened through Enver Hoxha's visits to Moscow and meetings with Soviet leader Stalin (1878-1953) until tensions mounted following Stalin's death and Hoxha's criticisms of Nikita Khrushchev's (1894-1971) policies in 1956.<sup>6</sup> This estrangement peaked in 1961, when Albania severed diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union, entering a 30-year period of relative isolation.

This split paved the way for a new alliance with the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong (1893-1976). This alliance, fueled by shared ideological beliefs and a desire to challenge Soviet dominance,<sup>7</sup> lasted for nearly two decades. China provided Albania with economic assistance, military training, and technical expertise, contributing to the development of various infrastructure projects and industries.

During the same period, Albania joined forces with other communist and socialist nations, offering assistance to various movements and governments in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. This was in line with Albania's foreign policy strategy, which aimed to advance socialism and build connections with other countries that opposed Western influences.

Albania stood by North Vietnam during the Vietnam War by providing backing and economic aid such as supplies and food. Albania officially recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and openly criticized U.S. involvement in the region.

Similar to its support for Vietnam, Albania also backed the Pathet Lao movement in Laos and offered support to Cambodia, despite complexities arising from Khmer Rouge's policies. It showed solidarity through several gestures, but on a scale comparable to the involvement with Vietnam.

The Cold War period witnessed a significant change in cultural and educational ties between Albania and the Soviet Union and between Albania and the PRC. As Albanian students were sent to study in both countries, the Soviet Union left its mark on culture through music, literature, films, and architecture, while China offered Albania

# Ethnic Diversity and Identity Politics in Comparative Perspective

For *News from Australia and the Pacific*, we ask contributors to reflect on their own research and the broader academic field in Australia and the Pacific of which it is a part. Our contributions aim to give a select overview of Asia-related studies in Australia and beyond, and to highlight exciting intellectual debates on and with Asia. In the current edition, we focus on the theme of “Ethnic Diversity and Identity Politics in Comparative Perspective.”

Our authors discuss how the spaces for and discourses about ethnicity and ethnic diversity in various parts of the region are circumscribed by the identity politics of the state and majority groups. Dak Lhagyal explains how the Chinese government seeks to maintain a form of ‘pluralist-unity’ through a strategy of depoliticising ethnicity. Lewis Mayo analyses how non-Indigenous majorities in Taiwan both engage with and contest Indigenous Austronesian cultures, in ways similar to the identity politics of non-Indigenous majority groups in Hawai‘i and Aotearoa

New Zealand. Both authors demonstrate the impact of these identity politics on the political, economic and socio-cultural marginalisation of Indigenous minority groups.

Edwin Jurriëns  
Deputy Associate Dean International-Indonesia, The University of Melbourne.  
Email: [edwin.jurriens@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:edwin.jurriens@unimelb.edu.au)

Cathy Harper  
Editor of *Melbourne Asia Review* at the Asia Institute, The University of Melbourne.  
E-mail: [catherine.harper1@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:catherine.harper1@unimelb.edu.au)

## The Depoliticising of Ethnicity in China

Dak Lhagyal

Echoing Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s critique of colour-blind racism in America, China’s approach to depoliticising ethnic issues tends to downplay legitimate concerns about the role of race or ethnicity in persistent social and economic inequalities.<sup>1</sup> This approach not only minimises the need for meaningful policy change but also fails to acknowledge the socio-economic privileges associated with the Han majority. Moreover, it overlooks the unique contributions of Indigenous knowledge and the deep connections to nature that minority groups hold, which are critical to the cultural and environmental richness of the nation.

In essence, the discourse surrounding China’s ‘second-generation ethnic policy’ and the push for ‘depoliticisation’ of its ethnic policies warrants a thorough examination. It mirrors the scepticism and critique surrounding colour-blindness observed by scholars studying Western societies. Therefore, a closer look at these issues requires understanding how China acknowledges multiple ethnic identities while simultaneously ensuring national cohesion and social harmony.

### Ethnic governance in China

China’s management of its ethnic minorities is marked by a strategy that seeks to balance tolerance and integration. Historically, this approach has involved a nuanced alternation between leniency and stringency, reflecting the dual

objectives of the nation’s policies: to acknowledge certain aspects of ethnic diversity while ultimately encouraging cultural assimilation.<sup>2</sup> The country’s demographic makeup – a predominant Han Chinese majority that comprises about 92 percent of China’s vast population coexisting with various ethnic minorities<sup>3</sup> – often sets the stage for this intricate dynamic in ethnic governance.<sup>4</sup>

The Chinese government’s acknowledgement of ethnocultural pluralism is encapsulated through the representation of a pan-ethnic *Zhonghua Minzu* 中华民族 “Chinese nation,” which encompasses all ethnic groups under this modern Han-centric national identity. While policies have been introduced to benefit ethnic minorities, including educational programs in native languages, scepticism persists regarding the true extent of support for ethnocultural diversity due to its Han-dominant perspective in national policymaking.

China’s ethnic governance strategy is said to be heavily influenced by the *duoyuan yiti* 多元一体 “pluralist-unity” framework, proposed by Fei Xiaotong in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> This concept posits that all of China’s ethnic groups, despite their linguistic, cultural, and religious differences, move from ‘diverse origins’ (*duoyuan* 多元 or pluralism) to a ‘single body’ (*yiti* 一体 or unity) constituting the Chinese Nation. This ideology underpins China’s narrative on ethnic integration, which is deemed vital for national unity and stability.<sup>7</sup>

In its ‘pluralist-unity’ model, China recognises ethnic diversity while promoting



Fig. 1 (above): United as one family of ethnic groups, building Chinese dream together in Tibetan and Chinese scripts on a poster, Qinghai Province. Image courtesy of Dak Lhagyal.

a unified national identity. This approach permits a degree of ethnic expression,<sup>8</sup> particularly in areas such as minority language usage<sup>9</sup> and cultural festivities.<sup>10</sup> However, any overt demands for increased autonomy are denounced as unlawful challenges to the established social harmony. Within this political landscape, for example, promoting education based on one’s native language from these minority groups, in accordance with the constitutional language rights of ethnic minorities in China, requires tactful expression to avoid inciting widespread protests.<sup>11</sup> This delicate balance highlights the complexity of navigating ethnic identity within a framework that seeks unity while acknowledging diversity.

The ‘pluralist-unity’ concept is not without contradictions in practice. For example, it promotes multiculturalism yet prioritises Mandarin as the national language that must be taught to minority children in preschools, often at the expense of non-dominant languages.<sup>12</sup> An inherent contradiction lies in its ambiguity, signifying a plurality of ethnicities or nationalities while emphasising a singular and unified *Zhonghua* 中华 nation or race.

The ‘pluralist-unity’ ideal, therefore, presents a dilemma. It encompasses a wide range of ethnicities and cultures but tends towards the commonality in a unified *Zhonghua* nation. This paradox has profoundly influenced China’s ethnic policies, offering a foundation for those advocating “unified community of the Chinese nation” and those who see

diversity as a pathway to uniformity.<sup>13</sup> This approach significantly impacts the education of Indigenous peoples in state-run schools in terms of choice for language of instruction in classrooms.

In multiethnic China, the Han community often emerges as the principal symbol of the nation’s modern identity. Historically, ethnic minorities have been portrayed as less advanced, in need of guidance towards modern norms of the Han peers. This viewpoint, which is labelled ‘Han chauvinism,’ underscores the Han-centric tendency in defining national identity.<sup>14</sup>

### Depoliticising ethnicity

China’s ‘second-generation ethnic policy’ has sparked a scholarly debate, not censored by the government, about the role of ethnicity in modern China.<sup>15</sup> This vision, not a formal legal policy document but spearheaded by scholars such as Ma Rong, advocates a paradigm shift in managing ethnic diversity.<sup>16</sup> Central to this debate is the ‘depoliticisation’ of ethnic identities, a proposal urging a rethinking of minority policies to foster a sustainable solution to ethnic conflicts in minority areas, ultimately creating lasting peace and stability in ethnically diverse regions.

Proponents of the ‘second-generation ethnic policy’ argue that ethnicity should cease to be a defining factor in the social and economic trajectory of China’s ethnic minorities. It argues that classification of nationality (*minzu*) since the 1930s has inadvertently ‘politicised’ ethnicities



### The Asia Institute

The Asia Institute is The University of Melbourne’s key centre for studies in Asian languages, cultures and societies. Asia Institute academic staff have an array of research interests and specialisations, and strive to provide leadership in the study of the intellectual, legal, politico-economic, cultural and religious traditions and transformations of Asia and the Islamic world. The Institute is committed to community engagement and offers a dynamic program of academic and community-focused events and cultural exchanges that aim to promote dialogue and debate.



Fig. 2 (above): Mural of China's ethnic minorities at the National Museum of Chinese Writing, Anyang. (Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user Gary Todd)

by categorising these groups as political entities with territorial affiliations in their corresponding 'autonomous' states or provinces, thus having a negative impact on national cohesion.

Despite differing in their political and historical backgrounds, there are notable similarities between the 'depoliticisation' approach in China and the idea of 'colour-blindness' held by some in Western societies, particularly the United States. In the West, 'colour-blindness' has been critiqued for perpetuating the belief that racial and ethnic barriers no longer hinder the progress of historically marginalised groups.<sup>17</sup> This ideology promotes the illusion of a 'post-racial' society, where the existence of inequality and its causes is often overlooked, and diversity is celebrated only to a certain extent. This perspective, despite its liberal roots, may inadvertently conceal the racial and ethnic underpinnings of inequality, hindering true progress toward equal treatment.<sup>18</sup>

The depoliticisation notion emerging from China's 'second-generation ethnic policy' debate strikingly echoes the discourse on colour-blindness by advocating for the reduction of ethnicity's political significance. However, it risks oversimplifying the differences between ethnic groups concerning economic, educational, and social development. By advocating for depoliticisation of the group rights of ethnic minorities, the argument disregards structural inequalities associated with ethnicities that account for the underlying socio-economic disparities between the Han majority and ethnic minorities.

Dak Lhagyal

McKenzie Postdoctoral Fellow at the Asia Institute, The University of Melbourne.  
Email: [fnu.lajiadou@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:fnu.lajiadou@unimelb.edu.au)

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## Austronesians and "Localism" in Taiwan, Hawai'i, and Aotearoa New Zealand

Lewis Mayo

In her keynote address at the New Zealand Asian Studies Conference held in November 2023 at Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha – The University of Canterbury in Ōtautahi (Christchurch) in Te Wai Pounamu, the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand – Professor Bavaragh Dagalomai/Jolan Hsieh (謝若蘭 Xiè Ruòlán) of the Department of Ethnic Relations and Cultures at National Dong Hwa University in Hualien, began by speaking in Siraya, her ancestral language.

### The Siraya people and Taiwan's indigenous Austronesian history

The act of speaking their ancestral language is a powerful gesture of cultural reclamation by members of the Siraya community, the indigenous inhabitants of the area around Tainan, the part of Taiwan where a colonial outpost was established by the Dutch in the early 1620s, setting in motion the processes which would see Taiwan become a place where the indigenous population have become a subordinated minority. The Siraya were

among the first of Taiwan's Austronesian peoples to experience this process of subordination, as their traditional lands were located in the places where incoming peoples were concentrated from the mid-17th century onwards.<sup>1</sup> Until a few decades ago Siraya was primarily a language preserved in old texts, the first of which were produced by Dutch missionaries with the goal of Christianising the Siraya population, with Siraya people in the 20th and 21st centuries having become primarily speakers of various forms of Chinese.<sup>2</sup>

Siraya, like the other indigenous languages of Taiwan, belongs to the Austronesian language family, a family which spread out from Taiwan into Southeast Asia and then through the Pacific Islands and also across the Indian Ocean to Madagascar. Aotearoa New Zealand and Hawai'i are the southernmost and northernmost sites to which Austronesian languages spread in the era of settlement by people using traditional Oceanic seafaring techniques.<sup>3</sup>

The present-day situation of the Siraya people, like that other Austronesian-background peoples in Taiwan, is similar to that of Māori people in Aotearoa New Zealand, and Kānaka Maoli/Ōiwi – Native Hawaiians – in Hawai'i. They are minorities

in places dominated by populations that have moved there in the course of the last few centuries. Loss of land, of political self-determination, and of language and culture have been the common historical experiences of Austronesian-background peoples in all three places. Such processes necessitate ongoing action for the assertion of political and cultural rights and for the recovery of languages that have lost ground to those spoken by the incoming populations.<sup>4</sup>

### The identity politics of non-Indigenous majorities in Taiwan

While the political and cultural subordination of indigenous peoples to populations which arrived later is something found across the world, from Siberia, to mainland and island Southeast Asia, to Northeast Asia to the Americas and the Caribbean and to Australia, there is a distinctive set of features that mark the situations in Taiwan, Hawai'i, and Aotearoa New Zealand as historically linked.<sup>5</sup> We can argue that the three places have been shaped by a common set of historical processes that involve interactions between Austronesian peoples, the Chinese and wider East Asian realm, the Americas, and the Anglo-Celtic and Continental European cultures of the North Atlantic. These forces began to interact directly with each other in the 1500s. In all three cases, we see processes of demographic, cultural, linguistic, and political de-Austronesianisation. At the same time, in all

three cases, we see the emergence of non-Austronesian local cultures and identities which assert their distinctiveness and the importance of their own histories and identities that contrast both with those of the places from which their forebears originated and from those of societies with which they have much in common. In recent times, this assertion of cultural distinctiveness by the non-indigenous local majorities has entailed a complex combination of support for and resistance to the re-assertion of the cultural and political rights of the original Austronesian inhabitants.<sup>6</sup>

In Taiwan this assertion of the cultural distinctiveness of the local non-Austronesian population is primarily articulated in the form of a Taiwan localism that presents Taiwan culture and history as distinct from those of China, a localism that is strongly connected to the project of achieving Taiwan independence – the de jure recognition that Taiwan is a sovereign independent entity, not part of the territory of a Chinese nation-state.<sup>7</sup> Although the majority of Taiwan's population is of Chinese descent, non-Austronesian cultural and political activists who are involved with the idea of articulating Taiwanese distinctiveness contest the idea that Taiwan's culture and history are simply a subset of the history and culture of China. Although Taiwan's Austronesian history is understood as part of what creates the distinctiveness of Taiwanese culture, the narratives which affirm that Taiwan's history is separate from that of China tend to concentrate on aspects of the historical experience of Taiwan's Han population in the

Continued Overleaf

years between the 1600s and the present which are not fully shared with the mainland. The 50 years between 1895 and 1945 when Taiwan was a colony of Japan are central to presenting Han Taiwanese history as being separate from that of the Chinese mainland.<sup>8</sup>

### Taiwan “localism” in comparative perspective

We cannot discuss questions associated with Taiwan’s historical and cultural relationship with the Chinese mainland in isolation from the strong assertion of the government of the People’s Republic of China that Taiwan is part of its territory and the political consequences which that claim has for Taiwan’s future. At the same time, the parallels between localist images of the distinctiveness of the Taiwan past and the images of local culture and history that are produced by non-indigenous majority populations in Hawai’i and Aotearoa New Zealand are striking. While the formal political circumstances of Hawai’i and Aotearoa New Zealand are very different – the latter being a sovereign and independent nation-state with its own government and armed forces, and the former being the 50th of the 50 states of the United States of America – in each case the local non-indigenous majorities have a strong sense of their own distinctiveness. This sense of distinctiveness is framed in part by distinguishing “true” locals from “non-locals”. “Non-locals” are non-indigenous inhabitants of those lands whom the old settler majority populations – the “true” locals – frequently depict as outsiders, a phenomenon that is also found amongst “locals” in Taiwan.

A good part of the energy associated with Taiwanese localism involves the distinction made within Taiwan between those Han Taiwanese whose families were present on the island prior to 1945, people whose ancestral languages are Taiwan Hokkien and Taiwan Hakka, and people who arrived from the Chinese mainland after 1945 when Japanese rule ended and Taiwan was brought under the control of the government of the Republic of China. The most important part of this post-1945 population are those who came to Taiwan after the 1949 defeat of the government of Chiang Kai-shek, then president of the Republic of China, by the forces of the Chinese Communist Party in the Chinese Civil War.<sup>9</sup> This emigré/refugee population was strongly linked to the ideology of Chinese unificatory nationalism which held that the peoples of Taiwan were part of a larger Chinese nation and that Taiwan and the Chinese mainland were a single entity, an ideology that was taught in Taiwan schools between the 1940s and the 1980s. Since the 1980s the rejection of this ideology has often gone hand in hand with an assertion that the pre-1945 Hokkien and Hakka-background Han peoples are, along with Taiwan Austronesians, those who are the true exemplars of Taiwan local culture.<sup>10</sup>

In Hawai’i the sense of the distinctiveness of non-indigenous local identity is much less formal; it focuses on the culture of “Locals” – Hawai’i people of Asian-Pacific descent who are not native Hawaiians (although this is often an ambiguous issue because so many people in Hawai’i are of mixed descent)<sup>11</sup> – as opposed to the culture of Haoles – Caucasians, particularly those from the US mainland.<sup>12</sup> Pijin – Hawaiian Creole English – which emerged on the plantations where Asian migrants were working in the 19th century – is a powerful informal marker of the division between the culture of Locals and that of Haoles.<sup>13</sup> Pijin is full of Hawaiian words, along with words from Chinese languages and from Japanese, and functions as a badge of localness that is similar to the way in which Taiwan Hokkien functions as a badge of localness that contrasts with Mandarin – the main language of education and of public life in Taiwan, a status that is similar to that of Standard American English in Hawai’i.

Non-indigenous local distinctiveness in Aotearoa New Zealand is primarily manifested in the concept of Pākehā culture,



Fig. 1 (above): A sketch of the Siraya people in southwestern Taiwan by P. Fritel (before 1895). (Image in the public domain available on Wikimedia Commons)

the culture of New Zealand’s Anglo-Celtic majority. For intellectuals in particular, the articulation of a distinctive Anglophone New Zealand culture that is specific to that place and different from the culture of Britain, which was historically the source of the majority of New Zealand’s non-indigenous inhabitants, has been an ongoing preoccupation.<sup>14</sup> A central plank of these cultural narratives is that of a bi-cultural nation, Māori and Pākehā (which has generally meant Caucasians of Anglo-Celtic heritage), with Māori culture being what differentiates New Zealand from other white-dominated English-speaking countries (e.g., the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, Canada, and the United States). In recent years there has been more and more focus on the ways in which this Pākehā-centred narrative of non-Māori New Zealand identity excludes the cultures of non-indigenous people living in Aotearoa New Zealand who are not Pākehā, with Chinese, Indian, and other Asian New Zealanders being one of the most important groups (Asian background people were 17.3% of the Aotearoa New Zealand population in 2023, a percentage only slightly smaller than that of the Māori population).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, there are grounds for arguing that one of the shaping forces in creating Pākehā identity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was the construction of Asian and, in particular, Chinese cultural worlds as an “Other” against which a Māori and Pākehā New Zealand was to be defined.<sup>16</sup> Much of the work of people concerned with Chinese and other Asian



Fig. 2 (above): Coat of arms of New Zealand. (Image in the public domain available on Wikimedia Commons)

cultures in Aotearoa New Zealand over the last decade or so has been to criticise this construction of New Zealand localism, simultaneously showing its historical inaccuracy and its effects in the present.<sup>17</sup>

### Dialogue and contention with Austronesian cultures

Taiwan and Aotearoa New Zealand thus represent cases of lands that have been de-Austronesianised in which the construction of a local identity by settler majorities has involved not only the attempt to differentiate local histories and identities from those of the homelands from which those settling majorities originated but also, in complex and different ways, an engagement with Austronesian cultures as ways to define their historical distinctiveness. At the same time, a rejection of China and Chinese culture has been an element in that articulation of local culture. This rejection of China and Chinese culture is much less prominent in the formation of narratives of Local identity and culture in Hawai’i, where the “Other” against whom Hawai’i’s “Locals” defined themselves was primarily the Haole – Caucasians, and in particular, those from the US mainland.

In the culture of these three non-Austronesian local cultures – those of the “Taiwanese” in Taiwan (defined against Chinese mainlanders), those of “Locals” in Hawai’i (defined against Haole mainlanders), and those of “Pākehā” in Aotearoa New Zealand (defined against other countries dominated by English-speaking whites, and – to a great extent – against Asian and especially against Chinese people who are living or seeking to live in New Zealand), narratives and images of localism and the authenticity associated with it have been formed from histories in which Austronesian, Chinese, and Anglo-European cultural forces have contested with each other. Whether the non-Austronesian cultures are primarily Sinophone (in the case of Taiwan) or primarily Anglophone (in the case of Aotearoa New Zealand) or Creolised (in the case of Hawai’i) has perhaps been less important than how each of them has sought to configure localism in dialogue and in contention with the Austronesian peoples whose lands they have come to occupy.

Lewis Mayo is a Lecturer in Asian Studies at the Asia Institute, The University of Melbourne. email: [lmayo@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:lmayo@unimelb.edu.au)

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# Surabaya at a Crossroads

**ISEAS** YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE

<https://www.iseas.edu.sg>

The Regional Social and Cultural Studies program at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (Singapore) adopts a sociological and anthropological approach to studying Southeast Asia, including on local communities and those at the fringes, beyond the macro perspectives. Analyses of Indonesian politics, state, and society overlook local dynamics and tend to be Jakarta-centred.

The three contributors of this collection are scholars working on Islamic trends in Indonesia, but they are also observers of changes and issues surrounding them. The pieces demonstrate how a province such as Surabaya, which in Indonesia is probably the second largest metropolis after Jakarta, is at a crossroads in managing political

contestations, highlights the tension between local and national identity, and foregrounds issues of environmental management and crime. The articles posit that Surabaya has come a long way in grappling with these issues. While some, such as managing diversity, have made inroads, others, such as managing climate change and crime,

require more work. The articles go beyond describing the problems, and provide solutions to improve existing conditions.

Dr Norshahril Saat is Coordinator of the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Program at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. Email: [norshahril\\_saat@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:norshahril_saat@iseas.edu.sg)



## Surabaya's Javanese "Egalitarianism": Why It Matters for Democracy

Pradana Boy Zulian

Javanese society is known for its high-context culture. In cultural studies, high-context culture is defined as a type of culture in which communication between people tends to rely on being implicit and indirect, and in the form of symbols, signs, gestures, and clues. High-context culture is "a culture that prioritises group harmony and well-being over individual achievement."<sup>1</sup> High-context culture features a common ground for the Javanese people. However, within this broader cultural context, Surabaya embraces a distinctive cultural vibe that fosters a more democratic atmosphere within Javanese society.

While Java is often characterised as feudalistic and aristocratic, the way culture is practised is not monolithic, and internal variations exist. Ayu Sutarto, for instance, identified various cultural sub-regions (known as *tlatah*) within East Javanese society.<sup>2</sup> These are characterised by distinctive systems of religion, community organisation, knowledge, livelihood, economics, language, art, and technology. This demonstrates that Javanese society is plural and dynamic. These sub-cultures include the *Mataraman* culture, which represents a stratified and feudalistic society as a result of the Mataram Kingdom's influence; the Madura Island culture, which exhibits frankness, durability, and to some extent, resistance; *Pandhalungan*, which is

associated with the successful acculturation of Javanese and Madurese cultures in the eastern part of East Java; and the *Pangarekan* culture, which dominantly encompasses the city of Surabaya and surrounding areas. The inhabitants of this area who embrace its culture are popularly labeled as *Arek Surabaya*, which literally translates into the "Folk of Surabaya." In a more technical context, the term also refers to those who follow the values, practices, and ways of life associated with the people of Surabaya.

### The Arek culture in Surabaya and the egalitarian spirit

In Surabaya, the *Pangarekan* or *Arek* culture is distinctive. Abdillah,<sup>3</sup> Winiasih,<sup>4</sup> Jauhari<sup>5</sup> and Sriyanto and Fauzie<sup>6</sup> have significantly studied the *Arek* culture. Historically, the *Arek* culture originated from a village community characterised by its egalitarianism, openness, democracy, and high levels of solidarity. The term *arek* is derived from the Old Javanese language *ari-ika*, which means "younger brother/child." However, the term's meaning has been culturally transformed to encompass the qualities of courage, fearlessness, and unwavering resolve.

Furthermore, the *Arek* culture also appears to exhibit a less pronounced hierarchical structure. For example, the relationship between children and parents is characterised by a high degree of fluidity. Most children and adolescents in Surabaya utilise the *ngoko* language (used by peers) when conversing with their seniors. Accordingly, the culture of Surabaya is also distinguished by the common use of swear words, which other cultures may perceive as offensive. Expressions such as *jancuk*, *cuk*, *hancik*, *jangkrik*, and *diamput* are commonly used to express closeness among comrades. These swearing words employ a model that refers to various things and do not always express anger. Instead, they may also express regret, sadness, disappointment, admiration, humiliation, surprise, intimacy, or humor, among other things. The utilisation of swearing language, particularly in expressing disillusionment, indignation, and rejection of political decisions that contravene the people's will, exemplifies the *Arek* culture's endorsement of people's capacity to challenge social norms.

How does the Surabayan culture impact the democratic culture in Javanese society? In general, it can be said that the distinct cultural character of *Arek Surabaya* has allowed independent actions and democratic public participation both in social, political, and economic dynamics. Moreover, it has been able to provide the social capital that enables society to have a healthy democratic culture.

Politically, in this democratic and egalitarian culture, *Arek Surabaya* is actively involved in supporting, monitoring, or rejecting government policies, especially those relating to the organisation of public spaces. The degree of democracy within a region can be gauged by the extent of public participation. Unlike other Javanese societies, the *Arek Surabaya* culture, which has traditionally encouraged a high degree of freedom, actively shapes public spaces in the people's favor.

Economically, the distinct culture of Surabaya has triggered public economic initiative. This can be observed in the trend of urbanisation since 1967. They have played a pivotal role in transitioning from a subsistence economy to an urban economy,

by establishing "home-based businesses" in *kampung-kota* (urban-village), which specialise in a diverse range of products, including bag embroidery, clothing, and cakes.

Furthermore, *Arek Surabaya* utilise public land for their people's needs and as an additional source of income for the community. Private landowners attempt to lease their unused land to fish farmers in exchange for one-third of the profits, allowing the farmers to benefit from fish sales. They also utilise the city's parks, which now number approximately 100, as places for meeting, trading, playing, and other socialising activities. Another initiative has focused on processing waste materials to create economic value. This is achieved through the establishment of 663 waste banks across the city, which successfully allowed most residents in Surabaya to have access to waste banks. This is a positive development for democracy and citizen participation in the organisation of urban space.

Surabaya stands out as a distinctive culture within the broader Javanese society. It is characterised by egalitarianism, openness, and democracy, which have positively impacted increased public participation across various social, political, and economic domains.

Pradana Boy Zulian is a Visiting Fellow at Regional Social and Cultural Studies, ISEAS Yusof Ishak, Singapore. He is also an Associate Professor in Islamic Legal Studies, University of Muhammadiyah Malang in Indonesia. Email: [pradana@umm.ac.id](mailto:pradana@umm.ac.id)

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Fig. 1 (above): Tugu Pahlawan (Heroes Monument) in Surabaya, Indonesia. [Photo courtesy of Wikimedia user Iuvvisual, reprinted under Creative Commons license, 2016].

Fig. 2 (right): A crowd in front of a large house, presumably some kind of revolt, in Surabaya, circa 1900-1910. [Photo courtesy of Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) and Leiden University Library via Wikimedia, Public Domain].





## Life After Risma Mayorship: Surabaya's Performance on Environmental Issues

lim Halimatusa'diyah

As one of the cities in East Java with a higher gender development index vis-a-vis its neighbours,<sup>1</sup> Surabaya made history by having the first female mayor elected in Indonesia through the direct regional election. Tri Rismaharini (popularly known as Risma) was the first female mayor of Surabaya. First elected in the 2010 local election (*pilkada*), she continued to serve in the post for two terms. In 2015, she was re-elected with a solid landslide victory of 86.22 percent.<sup>2</sup>

As the first female mayor in the country, Risma has successfully proven that women are capable of becoming great leaders. She brought positive changes to the region, too. For example, Surabaya won various awards under her leadership; she also received many awards, demonstrating her excellent leadership. Among the awards that Surabaya received were the adipura kencana – which it won for eight years in a row from 2011 to 2018 – for the metropolitan city category, as well as the adipura paripurna in 2016,<sup>3</sup> designated for regions that implement sustainable environmental development.

In 2012, Surabaya was awarded the best city in Asia Pacific for its success in environmental governance and increasing public participation in environmental management. In 2017, Surabaya also received the Global Green City award at the Global Forum on Sustainable Settlements and Cities event from the Global Forum on Human Settlements (GFHS), in New York, United States.<sup>4</sup>

In 2015, the World City Mayors Foundation regarded Risma to be the third-best mayor in the world for her efforts in transforming Surabaya into a greener and well-organized city. For her remarkable breakthroughs on environmental issues, she was also named one of Fortune magazine's 50 influential figures in the world along with other figures such as Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.<sup>5</sup>

Some of Risma's programs and policies during her leadership included the development of protected areas of Surabaya's East Coast (Pamurbaya) as Green Open Space (GOS), covering an area of 2,871 hectares to protect the city from floods. Her other initiatives included the construction of reservoirs and urban forests for water supply, the development of 420 city parks across the city of Surabaya,

the "green belt" with a total of 35 hectares to absorb carbon dioxide emitted by vehicles, and the construction of 26 units of compost houses in several places that both reduce landfill waste and can even generate electricity to light up the park and the surrounding areas.

The public was also trained to produce compost independently for personal urban farming or community income generation. The landfill in Surabaya was also utilised as a waste power plant to generate electricity. Additionally, to increase public participation in environmental management and mass transportation, Surabaya has established the Suroboyo Bus on the main road, allowing people to access it in exchange for plastic waste.

Where does Surabaya's environment stand after Risma stepped down? To be sure, Surabaya's performance in environmental

Fig. 1 (left): Tri Rismaharini hands over compensation to flood and landslide victims in Nagari (village) Sungai Durian, Patamu District, Padang Pariaman Regency, West Sumatra. [Photo courtesy of Ministry of Social Affairs of Republic of Indonesia, 2024, Wikimedia, Public Domain.]

Fig. 2 (below left): Suroboyo Bus. [Photo courtesy of Wikimedia user Mujjonmaruf and reprinted under Creative Commons licence, 2021.]

Fig. 3 (below right): Surabaya seen from its waterways. [Photo courtesy of the Government of Surabaya, 2020, Wikimedia, Public Domain.]

aspects has deteriorated. Under Risma's leadership, Surabaya's Environmental Quality Index (IKLH) data – measured by the quality of water, air, and green land cover – consistently ranged over 60 (from 2017 to 2020). After Risma left office, there was a drastic spike in 2021, especially due to the effects of COVID-19, which restricted people's physical mobility. However, in the subsequent years, Surabaya's environmental quality index experienced a significant decline to 56.97 and 54.52 in 2022 and 2023, respectively.

Additionally, various flood prevention and mitigation programs that Risma had implemented to minimize the incidence and impact of floods are no longer as effective as they were under her leadership. Floods in Surabaya occur more frequently and have a larger scope and impact. In February 2024, for instance, there was a major flood that paralyzed around 23 points in the city of Surabaya.<sup>6</sup> Apart from the high rainfall, flood prevention policies and programs are no longer optimally executed.

The incumbent mayor, Eri Cahyadi, plans to re-run in the 2024 elections. His candidacy has garnered criticism from the public due to his inability to make progress. Some public criticisms or comments circulating online include those related to flooding, the absence of progress for Surabaya, and the performance of the incumbent mayor compared to Risma as the previous mayor.

Why do environmental policies that were successfully implemented and achieved positive impacts no longer perform well when the leaders of the region are replaced? One reason is that regional leaders assume much power and influence in the running of their constituents. One study shows that when local leaders such as district heads and mayors enjoy autonomous power, a policy's success becomes highly dependent on personalities.<sup>7</sup> In the same vein, local bureaucrats relied heavily on their directives in every policy decision and implementation.

Furthermore, the discretionary power that often prevails is the frequent rotation of officials at the regional level, which impacts the development of a good bureaucratic culture for achieving successful policy outcomes. The current mayor, for example, rotated 231 Surabaya government officials by the end of 2023, including nine heads of departments.<sup>8</sup>

In short, the discretion of power has made policy sustainability strongly dependent on the ability and commitment of the local leaders, not on the ability of the local government bureaucracy to sustain and maximize the policy's achievements.

lim Halimatusa'diyah a Visiting Fellow in the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, a Senior Lecturer at Islamic State University (UIN) Syarif Hidayatullah, and a Deputy Director for Research at the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) UIN Jakarta. Email: halimatusadiyah\_lim@iseas.edu.sg



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## The Drug Problem in Surabaya's Ghetto

A'an Suryana



On 18 April 2024, 11 people were arrested for drug consumption in Jl. Kunti, Surabaya. This episode serves as a stern reminder that drug circulation and addiction remain rampant in the second-largest city in Indonesia. In 2023, drug cases topped the city's crime rates, accounting for 787 of the total 2,156 criminal cases (36 percent).<sup>1</sup> Vehicle theft (25 percent) and aggravated theft (15 percent) make up the other crimes. Jl. Kunti has often been regarded as a drug-ridden *kampung* (village). Eradicating the drug problem in this area remains a challenge. How can the city be drug-free?

Surabaya residents and those living around Jl. Kunti associate the area with various kinds of drugs, especially methamphetamine (locally known as *sabu-sabu*). The police frequently arrest drug traffickers and consumers in the area, with the biggest recent bust taking place in March 2021. Four hundred and fifty security personnel, including police officers, raided the *kampung* to arrest three drug dealers. However, the raid was unsuccessful as two suspects had fled the scene due to prior knowledge through an information leak. The regular failures of security personnel enforcing the law further cemented Jl. Kunti's reputation as a drug haven.

Jl. Kunti remains popular for drug dealers or traffickers because it provides facilities for addicts to consume drugs. Traffickers would normally erect makeshift huts made

from wooden poles and tarpaulin sheets in different small streets or alleys in the *kampung* for consumers to freely take drugs. Others provide rooms in their houses for consumers.<sup>2</sup> Consuming drugs on the spot is known in local terms as "andok." The area has been a popular spot for taking drugs for nearly 25 years.<sup>3</sup> Addicts felt safe consuming drugs in the area since they were protected by drug dealers and residents.<sup>4</sup>

The economic benefits underlying the drug trade make eradicating the trend difficult. For many, selling drugs is a livelihood, whether part-time or full-time. For instance, an individual who ran a petrol retailer shop in Jl. Kunti also served as a drug trafficker to earn additional income.<sup>5</sup> Although the police eventually caught him, his case highlights that economic motivations remain a decisive factor for the persistence of drug trafficking in the area.

More importantly, corruption within law enforcement agencies significantly hampers efforts to combat the drug problem effectively. Some police personnel were involved in the circulation of drugs in Jl. Kunti and its surrounding area, making it even more challenging to eradicate the drug problem. These officers shielded drug traffickers operating in Jl. Kunti and in other parts of Surabaya, allowing them leeway in distributing drugs across the city. In March 2021, three police personnel were arrested for receiving kickbacks (regularly for six months) from drug traffickers at Jl. Kunti. There is enough evidence showing some

police officers protecting drug traffickers in the area. Despite the arrest, drug trafficking continued to thrive, which suggests that these disciplinary efforts were ineffective in deterring corruption among other officers.

Deeper involvement by local people and police personnel prevented Surabaya metropolitan police from rooting out the practice entirely. In October 2021, the Surabaya metropolitan police conducted the biggest raid in Jl. Kunti with 450 police personnel involved in the raid.<sup>6</sup> The police interrogated hundreds of people who lived in areas surrounding Jl. Kunti. They combed the area thoroughly but could only arrest one out of the three drug dealers who were the subject of police's target. The escape was possible due to a tip-off, either from corrupt police officers or residents who have an interest in maintaining the drug trade in the area.

While the complicity of police personnel complicates efforts to resolve the drug problem in the area, alleviating the issue is not entirely impossible, as demonstrated in Jakarta's experience of successfully transforming the "drug *kampung*" in Kampung Bali, Central Jakarta, into a drug-free area. Between 1995 and 2005, Kampung Bali became a popular spot for drug traffickers, but it has since gradually become a drug-free area. Cooperation among various government stakeholders was needed to ensure the success of the anti-drug movement. In the case of Kampung Bali, the police established a post in the area to monitor its security and crime situation, and to deter drug traffickers from operating. The police also organised frequent, random anti-drug tests on residents and conducted regular raids. In addition, the Jakarta metropolitan police organised monthly evaluation to assess the effectiveness of their programs.<sup>7</sup>

The Jakarta government, residents, and the National Anti-Drug Body (*Badan Narkotika Nasional*) also collaborated to provide job training for drug traffickers to help them find alternative jobs to sustain themselves economically. This was important because joblessness and economic reasons were major factors causing many to turn to drug trafficking. One of the trainings provided by the government and stakeholders included bringing trainees closer to the Betawi culture, which

Fig. 1 (above): Police station in Surabaya. [Photo courtesy of Wikimedia user inBaliTimur and reprinted under Creative Commons license, 2017]

is native to the people of Jakarta. Following that, former drug traffickers and addicts were hired to perform Betawi songs or dances in Betawi-style weddings or other cultural events in areas of Greater Jakarta, including Depok, Tangerang, and Bogor. These initiatives serve as a more sustainable source of income for former drug traffickers and recovering addicts.

While much remains to be done in eradicating drug issues in Jl. Kunti and its surrounding area, the Jakarta experience in alleviating its drug problems is worth noting and emulating by stakeholders in Surabaya, including the Surabaya Metropolitan Police and the city mayoralty government.

A'an Suryana is Visiting Fellow at Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme (RSCS), ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute. He is also lecturer in Political Science at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII). Email: [aan\\_suryana@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:aan_suryana@iseas.edu.sg)

### Notes

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Fig. 2: Postage stamps from Indonesia, promoting a campaign against drug abuse in villages. [Photo courtesy of Post of Indonesia via Wikimedia, 2019, Public Domain.]

# Chinese Buddhist Art: New Approaches and New Excavations

In recent years, archaeological excavations and new methodological approaches have triggered vivid debates in the field of Chinese Buddhist art. The newly discovered material holds promise for addressing challenges in the field, but it may also introduce additional problems. Likewise, new methodological approaches shed light on existing materials from new perspectives, while also revealing the boundaries of interpretation.

In this issue's 'China Connections' pages, we invite readers to take a closer look at the exciting development in Buddhist art and archaeology through the research and review from four art historians based at Chinese universities.

They examine a wide range of sites and material culture, spanning from the discovery of the earliest gilded bronze Buddha statues in an Eastern Han (25-220 CE) tomb to the reconstruction of a timber-wood structure

attached to the rock-cut grottoes of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE); from the shifting ontologies of Buddha images to the 15th-century murals in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries.

**ZHAO Jinchao**  
is an Assistant Professor in Art History at Tongji University and a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Global Asia, NYU Shanghai (2021-2023).  
Email: zhaojinchao123@tongji.edu.cn

## Gold gilded bronze Buddha statues discovered in Xianyang Chengren tombs

CHEN Ying 陈莹

In 2021, two gold gilded bronze Buddha statues were discovered in a tomb located in the southeast of Chengren village of Xianyang city in Shaanxi Province.<sup>1</sup> The discovery of the statues soon attracted the attention of several scholars, because some claimed the statues belong to the earliest gold gilded bronze Buddha statues, dating all the way back to the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 CE). Other scholars, however, argue the statues are dated to the period of the Sixteen States (AD 304-439; also known as

the Sixteen Kingdoms). According to them, the statues' style and material better match this period from which most gold gilded bronze Buddha statues are dated.

The tombs are preserved with an aligning pattern, which suggests that the tomb occupants belonged to the same family. Among the two gold gilded bronze Buddha statues discovered in tomb M3015, one is a standing Buddha cast with a single piece of mold [Fig. 1]. It is 10.5 cm in height and the

diameter of its bottom base measures 4.7 cm. The statue has an open hollow back, in the middle of which protrudes a short joint, which is suspected to be connected with the halo of the statue [Fig. 2].<sup>2</sup> The standing Buddha has a plain *ushnisha* (oval shape on top of the head of the Buddha). Its facial features are rendered coarsely. The Buddha wears a body-length robe, whose pleats are represented by U-shape patterns. The left hand of the Buddha holds a corner of the folded robe, and the right hand of the Buddha is missing. The excavation report says that the right hand is in the mudra of fearlessness.<sup>3</sup> The Buddha stands on a base in the shape of a lotus flower. The base was made separately from the standing Buddha. They are joined together through the protruding joint at the bottom of the statue.

The other statue is a piece of single-mold-cast artifact with five Buddha statues in

the front [Figs. 3-4]. It measures 15.8 cm in height and 6.4 cm in width. Its bottom has a protruding joint, which suggests that it might have been plugged into a base.<sup>4</sup> The piece is slightly damaged, causing three little holes in the middle. The front of the statue depicts five Buddhas in relief. On each side of the shoulders of the Buddha, which is located on the very top, is a small hole, through which the statue might have been attached to a niche.<sup>5</sup> The five Buddha statues in the front share similar features. They all have a plain *ushnisha* on top of their heads and sit cross-legged on the lotus seat with a meditation mudra.

The gold gilded bronze Buddha statues from Chengren tomb M3015 are considered to be the earliest of their kind in the archaeological report.<sup>6</sup> The claim would have been beyond doubt if the tomb had not been robbed. At the western end of the tomb's



Fig. 1: Frontal view of the standing Buddha from Chengren tomb M3015, anonymous, gold gilded bronze, 10.7×4.5cm, disputed date between Eastern Han (25-220CE) and the Sixteen States period (AD 304-439), Shaanxi. Source: Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiuyuan, "Shaanxi xianyang chengren mudi donghan jiazumu fajue jianbao, Kaogu yu wenwu 2022 (1): Cover 2.

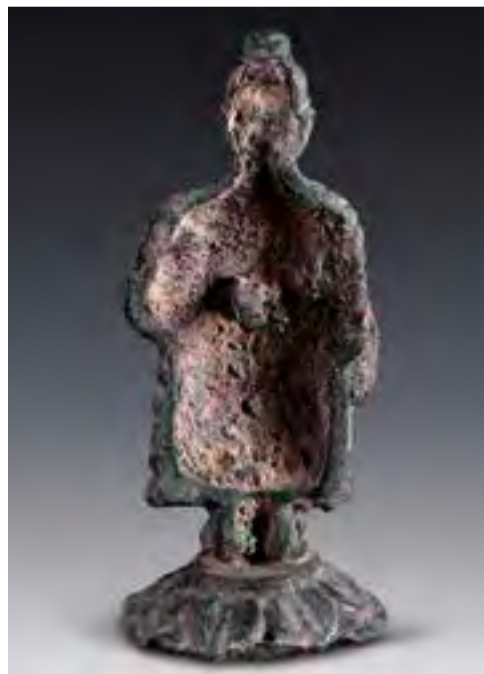


Fig. 2: Back view of the standing Buddha from Chengren tomb M3015, anonymous, gold gilded bronze, 10.7×4.5cm, disputed date between Eastern Han (25-220CE) and the Sixteen States period (AD 304-439), Shaanxi. Source: Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiuyuan, "Shaanxi xianyang chengren mudi donghan jiazumu fajue jianbao, Kaogu yu wenwu 2022 (1): Cover 2.



Fig. 3: Frontal view of five seated Buddhas from Chengren tomb M3015, anonymous, gold gilded bronze, 15.8×6.4cm, disputed date between Eastern Han (25-220CE) and the Sixteen States period (AD 304-439), Shaanxi. Source: Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiuyuan, "Shaanxi xianyang chengren mudi donghan jiazumu fajue jianbao, Kaogu yu wenwu 2022 (1): Cover 2.



Fig. 4: Back view of five seated Buddhas from Chengren tomb M3015, anonymous, gold gilded bronze, 15.8×6.4cm, disputed date between Eastern Han (25-220CE) and the Sixteen States period (AD 304-439), Shaanxi. Source: Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiuyuan, "Shaanxi xianyang chengren mudi donghan jiazumu fajue jianbao, Kaogu yu wenwu 2022 (1): Cover 2.



### Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai

The Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai serves as the hub within the NYU Global Network University system to promote the study of Asian interactions and comparisons, both historical and contemporary. The overall objective of the Center is to provide global societies with information about the contexts of the reemerging connections between the various parts of Asia through research and teaching. Collaborating with institutions across the world, the Center seeks to play a bridging role between existing Asian studies knowledge silos. It will take the lead in drawing connections and comparisons between the existing fields of Asian studies, and stimulating new ways of understanding Asia in a globalized world.

### Asia Research Center at Fudan University

Founded in March 2002, the Asia Research Center at Fudan University (ARC-FDU) is one of the achievements of the cooperation of Fudan and the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies (KFAS). Since its formation, the center has made extensive efforts to promote Asian studies, including hosting conferences and supporting research projects. ARC-FDU keeps close connections with Asia Research Centers in mainland China and a multitude of institutes abroad.

path, there is an early robbing hole. The hole is 3.4 meters away from where the Buddha statues were discovered. The distance between the robbing hole and the placement of the Buddha statues is considered far enough to assert that the Buddha statues were not brought in later by tomb robbers. In addition, there is little motivation for the tomb robbers to bring the Buddha statues and leave them in the tomb.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the author of the archaeological report regards the gold gilded bronze Buddha statues as funeral objects of the tomb M3015, and they were made no later than late Han dynasty. Scholars who hold the same opinion are Ran Wanli, Li Ming, and Zhao Zhanrui. In their article, they argue that the purpose of tomb robbers is to take objects instead of bringing the Buddha statues into the tomb.<sup>8</sup>

Yao Chongxin argues that it is possible the gold gilded bronze Buddha statues were brought into the tomb later by tomb robbers and that the statues are dated to the Sixteen States period.<sup>9</sup> The surface of both of the statues is worn and shiny, which suggests that they were often carried by their owners. Yao proposes that it is possible that the statues were belongings of the tomb robbers that were left accidentally in the tomb. The statues, which could be carried, may have functioned as amulets of the tomb robbers. More importantly, the style and material of the statues resemble those dated to the period of the Sixteen States. The standing Buddha statue discovered in Chengren is highly similar to a standing Buddha statue held in a private collection in Japan and another statue held in Kyoto National Museum, both of which are dated to the Sixteen States period. Most of the gold gilded bronze Buddha statues from the Sixteen States period are made of bronze, tin, and lead, which is also the main composition of the statues from the Chengren tomb.<sup>10</sup> Chengren tomb M3015 is not the only Eastern Han tomb where bronze Buddha statues were left by later tomb robbers from the Sixteen States period. A seated bronze Buddha statue and a seated gold gilded bronze Buddha statue were discovered in a late Eastern Han tomb in Shijiazhuang, Hebei.<sup>11</sup>

CHEN Ying is a lecturer in the Department of Art History at Shanghai University.  
Email: yingchen\_ox@163.com

## Notes

- 1 Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiuyuan 陕西省考古研究院, "Shaanxi xianyang chengren mudi donghan jiazumu fajue jianbao 陕西咸阳成任墓地东汉家族墓发掘简报", *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物, 2022 (1): 3-27.
- 2 Ran Wanli 冉万里, Li Ming 李明, and Zhao Zhanrui 趙占銳, "Xianyang Chengren mudi chutu donghan jintong foxiang yanjiu 咸陽成任墓地出土東漢金銅佛像研究", *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物, 2022 (1): 83.
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- 5 *Ibid.*, p.83.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.27.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.27.
- 8 Ran Wanli 冉万里, Li Ming 李明, and Zhao Zhanrui 趙占銳, "Xianyang Chengren mudi chutu donghan jintong foxiang yanjiu 咸陽成任墓地出土東漢金銅佛像研究", *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物, 2022 (1): 83.
- 9 Yao Chongxin 姚崇新, "Guanyu Xianyang Chengren Donghanmu chutu jintong foxiang de jige wenti 關於咸陽成任東漢墓出土金銅佛像的幾個問題", *Wenbo xuekan* 文博學刊, 2022(2): 17-29.
- 10 Li Jianxi 李建西, Shao Anding 邵安定, Song Junrong 宋俊榮, Li Ming 李明, and Zhao Zhanrui 趙占銳, "Xianyang Chengren mudi chutu Donghan jintong foxiang kexue fenxi 咸陽成任墓地出土東漢金銅佛像科學分析", *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物, 2022(1): 123-128.
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## Reconsidering the Notion of Sacrality for Chinese Buddhist Statues from the Second to the Sixth Century

WU Hong 吳虹

It has long been understood that image worship was an intrinsic property and a distinctive practice of Buddhism. Consequently, it is widely believed that the arrival of Buddhism in China in the first century brought about the practice of worshipping Buddha images, which inaugurated the tradition of image worship in China. Recent research, however, challenges this belief. Studies by Kurt Behrendt (2004) and Minku Kim (2019) on India and Gandhāra suggest that the worship of Buddha images was not widely established until after 200 CE, so later than the first appearance of Buddha images in China. This raises doubt about whether Buddha images were viewed as legitimate icons of worship since their introduction in China, and whether their worship played a central role in the earliest stage of Chinese Buddhism.

Studies of Buddhist literature provide crucial insights for this investigation. The earliest Buddhist narratives foregrounded sutras in the transmission of Buddhism, while Buddha figures only became a crucial element in such narratives after the fourth century. Similarly, Eric Greene's survey of anti- and pro-Buddhist apologetics demonstrates that image worship became represented as a prominent Buddhist practice only after the fifth century.<sup>1</sup> While Greene suggests that the newly developed attention to Buddhist image worship in polemical writings after the fifth century was entirely the result of historiographical construction, a review of archaeological evidence indicates this shift in Buddhist writings may not be altogether independent of changes in actual Buddhist practice.

Indeed, the archaeological evidence points to a turning point around the fifth century, after which the activity of making and worshipping Buddha images suddenly flourished. Before then, only a modest number of Buddha images were found in a limited geographical range within China, and these were typically keyed to funerary or daily-use objects as decoration rather than used as independent icons of worship, as several scholars have pointed out. For instance, the majority of Han-period Buddha images were discovered in the southwestern region centered on Sichuan province, most of which were found on money-trees unearthed from funerary contexts [Fig. 1]. Buddha images are typically located on the trunk of the money-trees, while traditional Chinese auspicious motifs such as copper coins, the Queen Mother of the West, Taoist priests, dancers, divine beasts, and phoenixes adorn the branches and bases of the tree. Given the placement of the Buddha images, being visually obstructed by densely decorated branches spreading out horizontally, it can be inferred that the Buddha statues were not intended as objects of worship, but rather as one of the many decorative elements that enhance the money tree's symbolism of ascending to immortality or bringing good fortune.

In addition to their use on funerary objects, Buddha images have been found in the Yangtze region in the third and fourth centuries, but these were on objects used in ordinary life, such as mirrors, incense burners, wine and food vessels. Taking the example of the vessel [Fig. 2], which is a pan-shaped jar: it is decorated with three molded small Buddha figures at the widest part of the body. Moreover, the small Buddha figures are visibly slanted as they have been applied to the jar's curved surface. The casual manner in which the Buddha statues are attached, along with their inevitable exposure to contaminants during the vessel's daily use, strongly suggests that these statues were considered merely auspicious decorative patterns rather than inviolable sacred images, as they were used to adorn secular utensils.

However, the situation changed drastically after the fifth century. A sudden surge in the production of Buddha images swept across the Chinese territories. It was during this time that the Hexi region saw the beginning of the construction work of the earliest grottoes in China. The earliest cave of the Binglin-si Grottoes was excavated in the year 420 during the Western Qin, while excavations of other grottoes like Dunhuang, Jinta-si, and Tiantishan also commenced around similar periods.

In 460 CE, under the auspices of the Northern Wei regime, construction of the Yungang Grottoes began in Pingcheng. Alongside these official projects, private sculptural making and patronage activities by common people also flourished.

Whereas only about 10 individual Buddhist statues dating back to the fourth century are known, over 120 statues from the fifth century alone have been identified. The number of statues dated between 500-580 CE on epigraphic ground exceeds 1500, and there are countless more Buddha statues without a precise date from the fifth and sixth centuries. Notably, during this prolific fifth-century period, Buddhist images no longer appeared as decorative images on secular objects. Whether it is sculptural steles, individual Buddha statues, or grotto sculptures, Buddhist statues only existed within sacred religious spaces, no longer mixed with secular life scenes depicted on objects like bronze mirrors, wine jars, or utilitarian jars.

The archaeological evidence therefore suggests a marked shift in attitudes towards making of Buddha images in *actual practice* around the fifth century. This change in practice most likely corresponded to, and was precipitated by, concurrent changes in the conception of Buddha images. While the early sutras maintain a utilitarian view of Buddha images – denying the presence of the spirit of the Buddha in the image (*Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, T224) – surveying donative inscriptions on Buddhist images allows us to observe how, beginning around the fourth and fifth centuries, Buddha images became identified with the Buddha himself. It is my contention that the heated discussion on the concept of *dharmakāya* in the intellectual milieu of Dark Learning (*Xuanxue* 玄學) of the Wei and Jin periods (220-420 CE) led to the understanding that Buddha images were worldly materializations of the abstruse body of the dharma. This homology between *dharmakāya* and Buddha images thus invested the latter with a divine character, which provided the crucial basis for the institutionalized practice of image worship in China.

Due to the limited length, this article cannot fully evaluate the influence of the discussion on *dharmakāya* on sculptural practices in China. However, it aims to propound a dynamic understanding of early Chinese perceptions of Buddha images. Worshipping Buddhist statuary was not necessarily central to the Buddhist praxis from the religion's initial phase in China. Nor was the establishment of Buddhist image worship in China necessarily the victory of foreign ideas, as commonly believed. Rather, it may have been based on the indigenous cultural understandings and interpretations of *dharmakāya*. Reconsidering these issues may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the early spread of Buddhism in China, the influence of Buddhism on Chinese culture, and the interaction and blending of local and foreign cultures. This article serves as a starting point and looks forward to further discussions in this regard.<sup>2</sup>

WU Hong is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy of Art and Art History at Fudan University.  
Email: Wu\_hong@fudan.edu.cn

## Notes

- 1 Eric Greene, "The 'Religion of Images'? Buddhist Image Worship in the Early Medieval Chinese Imagination", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 138.3 (2018), 455-84.
- 2 This article is adapted from "Handi er zhi liu shiji foxiang shengsheng guannian xintan" (*Fudan Journal* [Social Sciences] 2021, no. 5, 64-74) of the same author.



Fig. 2 (above). Celadon jar. He Yunao et al. eds, *Fojiao chuchuan nanfang zhi lu*, Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1993, Pl. 39.



Fig. 1 (left). Money tree, Chongqing Guoyou Museum. From He Zhiguo, *Yaoqianshu chubu yanjiu*, Beijing: Kexue Chubanshe, 2007, p. 37.

## Appropriation and Misrepresentation of the “Indian Buddha Image” in Early Tang Buddhist Art

YANG Xiao 杨筱

The transregional transmission of Buddhist art and culture has led to significant variations in form and function. However, numerous factors can affect the transmission of religious art and practice, complicating straightforward demonstrations of “inaccurate” transmission. This article highlights a rare and intriguing case from the early Tang Dynasty (618–690 CE): a Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva statue located in Guangyuan, Sichuan Province, southwestern China. Its upper body closely resembles a seated Buddha in the *bhūmisparśa mudrā* (earth-touching mudra), as seen on several clay tablets inscribed with “Indian Buddha Image” that were excavated in Chang’an (present-day Xi’an), the Tang capital. The prototype for such a Buddha image can be traced back to Bodhgayā, northeastern India. While this appropriation of forms underscores the Tang dynasty’s desire to adopt sacred images from Buddhism’s Indian homeland, it also reveals that Tang artisans, especially those situated beyond the capital, had considerable freedom to adapt and reinvent the newly introduced exotic artistic canon.



Fig. 1a (above) and 1b (right): Kṣitigarbha, Niche 17, Cave 726, Qianfoya, Guangyuan. H. 122cm. 7th century. (Photo and line drawing by the author)



Fig. 2 (below): “Indian Buddha image”, Xi’an, Shaanxi. Mold-pressed clay tablet, 7th century. Collected by National Museum of China. Photo by the author.



The return of Buddhist monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664 CE) from India to Chang’an (present-day Xi’an), the seat of the Tang court, in 645 CE marked a significant increase in interest in Indian Buddhism and its artistic traditions in the mid-to-late 7th century. A romanticized fascination with the birthplace of Gautama Siddhārtha, the founder of Buddhism, inspired Tang artisans to create Buddhist statues and murals imbued with the various Indian styles that were newly introduced along the Silk Road.<sup>1</sup> An intriguing example of such artistic recreation is Niche 17 of Cave 726 at the Thousand Buddhas Cliff in Guangyuan, Sichuan province, southwestern China [Figs. 1a–b]. In this niche, the artisans skillfully adapted the form features from a Buddha image originally from Bodhgayā, India, to represent a Kṣitigarbha bodhisattva. This appropriation of the Indian image, albeit with some misinterpretations, exemplifies the creative agency exercised by Chinese artisans in deploying their newly acquired exotic artistic language to craft new sacred imagery.

The Kṣitigarbha statue under discussion is depicted with the left hand placed in front of the abdomen and the right hand resting on the knee. This gesture contrasts with other Kṣitigarbha images but resembles contemporary Buddha statues found in Guangyuan, which are depicted in *bhūmisparśa mudrā*. Both the Kṣitigarbha and these Buddha figures are depicted wearing thin monastic robes that reveal the contours of their bodies, closely linking them to the “Indian Buddha Image” clay tablets unearthed in Chang’an. These tablets feature a seated Buddha in *bhūmisparśa mudrā*, flanked by two standing bodhisattvas on the front, and bear a dedicational inscription on the rear that states “Indian Buddha image commissioned by Su Changshī and Putong of Great Tang.” Hida Romi has convincingly dated these tablets between 650 and 670 CE based on the activities of the commissioners.<sup>2</sup> Similar plaque discoveries across South and Southeast Asia are all believed to have been inspired, albeit perhaps indirectly, by Buddha statues enshrined in the Mahābodhi Temple in Bodhgayā, depicting the moment when the historical Buddha attained his first enlightenment. The Buddhist statues in *bhūmisparśa mudrā* [Fig. 3] from the 8th century, housed in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, not only retain identical attire and mudras (hand gestures) but also the cushions behind the statues. All of these factors provide valuable insights for tracing the prototypes of the “Indian Buddha Image.”

The cushion placed behind the Buddha, known in Chinese as *yinnang* 隱囊, is typically adorned with tied ends encircled by lotus petals on each side. This particular motif is prevalent in Buddhist statues throughout the Indian subcontinent but is rarely found

in Chinese Buddhist sculpture. The cushion depicted in the “Indian Buddha Statue” clay tablet from Chang’an represents a rare example, although it has undergone significant simplification, with the tied ends shaped into two semi-circles adorned with

a beaded pattern. The Kṣitigarbha statue in Niche 17 of Cave 726 at the Thousand Buddhas Cliff in Guangyuan features a mandorla with two cloud-shaped patterns analogous in placement to the cushion in the “Indian Buddha image” tablet. This

mandorla, resembling the shape of the cushion with protruding tied ends, likely represents a misinterpretation of the original Indian design. Interestingly, a similar error in transregional transmission is also present in the Tangut-era Cave 465 in the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang. In Cave 465, the cushion-shaped backscreen painted behind a bodhisattva holding a flower mirrors the “cloud-shaped mandorla” of the Kṣitigarbha statue in Guangyuan.<sup>3</sup> This repeated mistake in artistic replication across thousands of kilometers, in addition to the substantial temporal gap between the two examples, highlights the challenges and complexities inherent in the dissemination and localization of Buddhist art in the Pan-Asian area.

How should we interpret the appropriation and misrepresentation in the Thousand Buddhas Cliff in Guangyuan? Both Buddha and Kṣitigarbha are depicted wearing monastic robes, with cushions or mandorlas placed behind the statues. These formal similarities played a significant role in reinterpreting the “Indian Buddha image” as a Kṣitigarbha image. This is not an isolated case, there are also instances in Guangyuan where Buddha statues are carved with gestures originally used for bodhisattvas. For instance, some statues from the same period are depicted with one hand raised, forming a sharp V-shape with the forearm and upper arm – a gesture typically seen in bodhisattva images in Indian styles, similar to the flanking bodhisattvas on the “Indian Buddha Image” clay tablets. Therefore, the appropriation of the Kṣitigarbha image should not be viewed as a spontaneous act of creativity but in conjunction with how Chinese artisans



Fig. 3 (right): Seated Buddha, Bihar, India. Stone, H. 74 cm. 8th century. Collected in Indian Museum, Kolkata. (Photo by LI Jingjie)

utilized newly introduced image elements to create Indian-style Buddha statues in the early Tang Dynasty. This appropriation of features with an apparent disregard for the original iconographic canon, specifically between Buddha and bodhisattvas, suggests that local artisans at that time may have had considerable freedom in the creation of sacred images with the new exotic style.

Yang Xiao 杨筱 is assistant research fellow at the Institute of Archeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Email: yangxiao@cass.org.cn

Notes

- 1 Sun-ah Choi, “Zhenrong to Ruixiang: The Medieval Chinese Reception of the Mahābodhi Buddha Statue,” *The Art Bulletin*, no. 4 (2015).
- 2 Hida Romi 肥田路美, “Seian shutsudo senbutsu no seisaku jijō to igi 西安出土磚佛の制作事情と意義,” in *Sho-tō bukkyō bijutsu no kenkyū 初唐仏教美術の研究* (Tōkyō: Chūō Kōron Bijutsu Shuppan, 2011), 55-90. Some illustrations has been updated in the Chinese translation, Hida Romi 肥田路美, “Xi’an chutu zhuānfó de qingkuang yu yiyi 西安出土磚佛的情況與意義,” in *Yunxiang ruixiang: Chutang fojiao meishu yanjiu 雲翔瑞像：初唐佛教美術研究* (National Taiwan University Press, 2019), 49-84.
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## New Discoveries and Research on Murals in Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries

WANG Ruilei 王瑞雷

In recent years, scholars based in China have conducted research on the cultural heritage of Tibetan Buddhism from various perspectives, resulting in a series of archaeological reports as well as case studies on particular traditions and specific monasteries. Included among these studies is a systematic study of Tholing Monastery 托林寺, the royal temple of the Guge 古格 Kingdom in the Ngari 阿里 region of Tibet, through examination of recently discovered materials and surviving murals depicted in the main hall.

Tholing Monastery, founded by Yeshe-Ö (Ye shes ’od, 947-1024), a descendant of the Tubo Dynasty, served as the political and religious center of the Guge Kingdom, which was the historical site of the Zhangzhung civilization. The monastery was not only the place where the Guge royal family conducted political affairs and issued decrees, but also a sacred site marking the beginning of the Later Diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet. Recent archaeological discoveries and research on Tholing Monastery centered on two main aspects.

Firstly, in August 2016, the north-side riverbed around Tholing Monastery slipped, resulting in the collapse of some early-stage stupas that had stood on the edge of the riverbed into the Xiangquan River. Therefore, the Institute of Cultural Relics Protection of the Tibet Autonomous Region and some other units relocated the endangered stupas. During this process, a large number of invaluable Buddhist *tsha-tsha* tablets in stupa shape and handwritten manuscripts were unearthed from the six relocated stupas. Notably, pages of a historical document from the 11th-12th century were found in a stupa partially collapsed into the valley [Figs.1-2]. The document recorded a range of important information, including wars between Guge and Glo yul 洛域, donation relationships between the Guge royal family and Tholing Monastery, land disputes between pastures and monasteries, as well as royal commendations and warnings to officials and loyal citizens. These documents are the earliest official documents of the Guge Kingdom discovered in western Tibet, providing valuable firsthand materials for scholars to understand the official documentation characteristics of the Guge Kingdom. The format, writing style, seal patterns, and preventive measures such as inked lines on the left margin of the documents are very similar to the official documents issued by the Dunhuang Tubo Dynasty. These findings offer precious materials for further understanding of the relationship between early Guge official documents and Tubo documents, as well as exploring the political and religious relationships and social conditions of the Guge Kingdom around the 11th-12th centuries. As such, these discoveries hold significant historical value.

Another breakthrough lies in the research on the Red Temple of Tholing Monastery. Constructed under the reign of the Guge King Khri nam mkha’i dbang po phun tshogs lde (1409-1481), the Red Temple constitutes the largest surviving Buddha hall from the Buddhist revival period of the Guge Kingdom in the 15th-16th centuries. Serving as an important ceremonial space for the royal family to worship, its murals reveal the early political and religious strategies of the Guge Kingdom, providing invaluable clues to the complex political and religious history of the middle-to-late Guge Kingdom. The



Fig. 2. Cover of *A Study on the Murals of the Red Temple of Tholing Monastery: History, Images, and Texts* by WANG Ruilei. (Zhejiang University Press, 2023)

mural configurations reflect the complex interactive relationships and religious discourses between sects of western Tibet and Ü-Tsang regions. My recently published book, entitled *A Study on the Murals of the Red Temple of Tholing Monastery: History, Images, and Texts* 托林寺红殿壁画研究：历史、图像与文本, resolves issues regarding the specific builders and the construction period of the Red Temple [Fig. 3]. Through comparative research on murals of similar themes from early and contemporary periods in the Ali and Ü-Tsang regions, and in conjunction with tantric texts and related rituals and practices, I reinterpret the content and teachings depicted in the murals of the Red Temple. This reconstruction elucidates the traditions of early Guge teachings and their interactions with the political and religious spheres of the Ü-Tsang region. Through detailed textual analysis of the murals, the book presents the historical landscape of the revival of Buddhist art and political expression in the Guge Kingdom during the 15th and 16th centuries.<sup>1</sup>

WANG Ruilei is currently a research fellow of the “Hundred Talents Program” in the School of Art and Archaeology at Zhejiang University. Email: ruileiwang@aliyun.com

Notes

- 1 This article was translated from Chinese into English by guest editor ZHAO Jinchao.

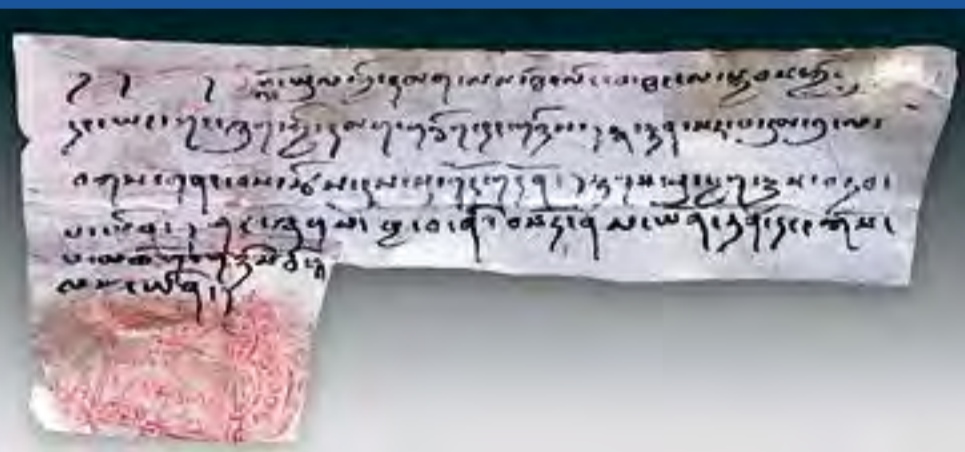


Fig. 1 (above). Military paper with seals. Official divination remarks prior to a war. (Photo courtesy of the author’s research team)



Fig. 2 (right). Military authorization paper with seals. (Photo courtesy of the author’s research team)

# Manila: Heritage, Memory, Nationhood

Ian Morley

The Philippines has a distinctive historical status in that the character of local society before 1946 – when national independence was granted – was influenced by Western imperialism (i.e., Spain and the United States) and also by Asian imperialism (i.e., Japan). In helping to (re)shape the urban environments in which Filipinos lived, and the culture by which the native population undertook daily activities, colonisation by foreign powers led to the establishment of public spaces and the construction of monuments which are still, significantly, critical to the present-day grasp of what it means to be Filipino. Colonial era public spaces and monuments thus still inform, in the postcolonial setting, Filipinos' understanding of collective memory.

In recent decades, the issue of memory has become a preoccupation of historical scholarship. Within, for instance, the evolving frames of social history and oral history, new methodologies have been established so as to explore/explain representations of the past. The move by historians to better grasp what memory is has, in consequence, led to new knowledge of memory's association with how we think about, and approach, the past (as members of society and as scholars). In consequence, a new historiography has broken down different kinds, and complexities, of history-memory relationships.

Given the history of the Philippines, and its colonisation by different countries from 1565 to 1946, historians – alongside anthropologists, sociologists, archaeologists, architects, etc. – have done much in recent times to show how

Filipinos' comprehend their country's past, and how this comprehension is utilised to inform collective memory and the sense of belonging to 'an imagined community,' to paraphrase Benedict Anderson.

Whilst, evidently, the notion of memory entails something personal and individual, it is also, in the view of many intellectuals, connected to cultural forms. As such, it is argued that memory is a survival of past

experiences and it is a reconstruction of those experiences from a present-day standpoint. If this is true, then, with regard to monuments, how do they today notify as to who persons such as Filipinos *really are*? Moreover, how do postcolonial ideologies and politics affect the process as to how persons know the past? Are, as the Stanford University historian Sam Wineburg contests, memory and history colliding worlds? How, in short, do they connect and overlap with each other in an Asian society with a history such as that in the Philippines? More specifically, why in the Philippines are colonial-era monuments uncontested elements within built fabrics, yet ones built after national independence are often contentious? In superficial terms, this is the impression given of countless monuments in Manila; ones dedicated to colonial era persons – native and foreign – stand respected, yet ones dedicated to postcolonial figures can be poorly maintained and/or damaged. As Figure 1 shows, along Roxas Boulevard – the principal roadway into the centre of Manila from the southern districts and the outlying port town of Cavite – numerous poorly maintained postcolonial monuments are visible. In contrast, in proximity to and inside the Spanish walled city known as Intramuros, monuments stand proud. Why so?

In this Focus section, we provide an overview of colonial-era spaces and monuments. Case studies are given to expose how they helped shape past identity and, indeed, how they have been used to further reinforce what it is to be 'Filipino' in the postcolonial setting. But there is still much to learn, and against this backdrop urban historical studies have been undertaken at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). Within CUHK's Department of History, in

## The Politics of Remembrance

### The Case of the Filipina Comfort Women Statue and the Kamikaze Pilot Memorial

Mar Lorence G. Ticao

Monuments serve as tangible representation of collective memory, commemorating events, people, or groups through physical structures. Commemoration involves "calling to remembrance" through ceremonies or markers, which significantly influence memory.<sup>1</sup> French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs introduced the modern study of collective memory, emphasizing that all memory, even personal, is socially constructed by the groups to which individuals belong. He distinguished between history, seeking objective truth, and collective memory, rooted in social groups and their contexts.<sup>2</sup>

The notion that collective memory is "constructed" aligns with American historian Michael Kammen's assertion that societies reconstruct their pasts to serve contemporary needs.<sup>3</sup> The French scholar Pierre Nora observed that in the past, societies had a unified, continuous way of remembering history. This kind of memory was integrated into their daily lives and traditions. However, in a contemporary society, due to rapid changes and a belief in progress, our memory has become fragmented. We no longer have this natural, continuous memory, so we create *lieux de mémoire*, like monuments and museums, to hold onto our history.<sup>4</sup>

Monuments dedicated to comfort women aim to place their suffering and resilience within public consciousness, evoking a profound sense of loss and victimhood. More than 50 memorials worldwide honor their memory, highlighting the trauma they endured and their agency in overcoming it. These monuments are essential in maintaining awareness of historical injustices and preventing the erasure of these painful memories.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Japanese kamikaze pilots are often memorialized as symbols of

Monuments and shrines are powerful representations of historical memory, capturing collective experiences and shaping national narratives. In the Philippines, the contrasting treatment of comfort women memorials and Japanese kamikaze shrines reveals the complex interplay between political alliances and historical memory. The removal of the comfort woman statue in 2018 amidst strengthening ties between Philippine-Japanese relations highlights the influence of political agendas upon collective memory. This selective memorialization, where diplomatic and economic interests overshadow calls for justice for affected groups, challenges us to rethink the role of monuments in the Philippines in fostering an inclusive and truthful understanding of history.



Fig. 1 (left): Filipina Comfort Women statue (since removed) in 2017 along Roxas Boulevard in Manila, Philippines. (Photo courtesy of Wikicommons user Ryomaandres and reprinted under Creative Commons license, 2021)

Fig. 2 (right): In 2004, a life-sized kamikaze pilot statue was erected in the town of Mabalacat in Pampanga. (Photo by the author, July 2023)

sacrifice. They can also be seen as victims of war, driven by military coercion.<sup>6</sup> In the Philippines, the proliferation of Japanese shrines reflects a complex historical narrative where these soldiers are remembered both as heroes and as tragic figures.

The presence of both comfort women and kamikaze memorials in the Philippines adds layers of complexity to the nation's memory and identity. This dual commemoration of wartime abuse and exploitation, alongside sacrifice and tragedy, underscores the constructed nature of collective memory,

influenced by political, social, and historical contexts. Furthermore, the contrasting treatment of these memorials reveals the selective nature of public memory, shaped by contemporary political alliances and national narratives.

### Filipina Comfort Women statue: Erasure of painful memories

The history of comfort women is a dark chapter that many Asian nations, including the Philippines, grapple with. During World War II, the Japanese Imperial Army coerced

addition to my own work, students of the MPhil and PhD programs have been exploring facets of the Philippines' urban and cultural past; critical to our collective endeavours have been inquiries to fathom the form and meaning of the colonial built environment.

Broadly speaking, with particular reference to the capital city of Manila, monuments and public spaces of both national and local significance are discussed. With regard to the provincial context, an overview of American colonial-era monuments is also supplied: monuments were a tool among many employed by the Americans from 1898-1946 to help promote national unity, national resistance, and the heralding of the modern age. Claudia Montero's paper looks at the American colonial monument to the national hero Jose Rizal in Manila, whilst Mar Ticao's paper opens up an intellectual avenue to rethink the politics of remembrance regarding monuments in the Philippines associated with World War II and Japan's occupation of the country.

Whilst in many Western nations, monuments allied to the theme of imperialism have been pulled down, vandalised, or intensely debated, in the Philippines no such discourse or civil unrest exists. Why? The series of case studies that follows, funded with RGC (Hong Kong) grant support, helps explain this situation and, in addition, why colonial historical monuments still matter today in the Philippines. As my own papers explain, much of the American colonial built environment was actually designed by Filipinos employed by the colonial government pre-1946, and the legacies of their work still remain. One Filipino architect, Antonio Toledo, in particular, has been much overlooked in written history, yet it was he who during the Commonwealth

Era – i.e., the final phase of American colonial rule (1935-41, 1945-6) – did much to forge the appearance and layout of the Philippines' largest city, Manila. It was he and his cohorts who introduced a proto-modern form of design which still imprints upon the city's urban environment today.

All in all, albeit with reference to Philippine history, there is still much to learn of the colonial past, its influence still upon the development of the built environment, and its legacies as to how people understand themselves today as members of a nation. The role monuments and the built environment have played in enlightening Filipinos as to who they are remains unclear. The four papers in this Focus section grant a window to re-evaluate what the Philippine urban past has been, and how it informs the present. Of course, the present has not been exclusively shaped by the past; but, the past Filipinos have a sense of has been affected by a complex mixture of recollection, reflection, culture, and politics. Much of that knowledge has been selected/given particular meaning. Therefore, are monuments, ultimately, to be regarded not just as a continuation of the Philippine past that has been, but a past that makes sense for the present?

**Ian Morley** is Vice Chair (External) of the Department of History at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is also Vice President of the International Planning History Society. His publications include the monographs *Cities and Nationhood: American Imperialism and Urban Design in the Philippines, 1898-1916*, *American Colonisation and the City Beautiful: Filipinos and Planning in the Philippines, 1916-35*, and *Remodelling to Prepare for Independence: The Philippine Commonwealth, Decolonisation, Cities and Public Works, c. 1935-36*.



Fig. 1 (left): The plinth of a monument, now removed, sited at Roxas Boulevard, Manila. The plaza surrounding the architectural feature has become a parking space for motorcycles. (Photo by the author, 2023).

approximately 200,000 women from various occupied territories, including around 1000 Filipino women, into sexual slavery, euphemistically referred to as 'comfort women.'<sup>7</sup> These women endured severe physical and emotional trauma. However, efforts to memorialize their suffering often encounter significant political resistance.

In December 2017, the Filipina Comfort Women statue was installed on Roxas Boulevard in Manila to honor the victims [Fig. 1]. The bronze figure of a blindfolded woman in traditional Filipina attire symbolized the comfort woman's strength and dignity. However, just four months later, the Department of Public Works and Highways removed it, citing a 'flood control project.'<sup>8</sup> This removal triggered outrage among activists and survivors, who viewed it as an attempt to erase painful wartime memories.

The removal of the comfort woman statue in Manila reflects clear political motivations, primarily driven by the government's desire to strengthen ties with Japan, a significant economic and political ally.<sup>9</sup> While President Duterte initially defended historical justice as a constitutional right, subsequent actions by his administration suggested a prioritization of diplomatic relations, widely perceived as a gesture to appease the Japanese government and suppress inconvenient historical truths.

Lila Shahani discusses the implications of removing comfort women monuments in the Philippines. She argues that erasing these monuments undermines collective memory, silencing the victims' voices and their struggle for justice. Monuments like the comfort woman statue in Manila are vital reminders of historical injustices, ensuring the remembrance of victims' suffering. Thus, removing them risks erasing painful memories from public consciousness, thereby undermining the comfort women's fight for recognition and justice.<sup>10</sup>

### Kamikaze Pilot statue: Selective memory and reconciliation

The Philippines hosts several Japanese shrines and monuments, found in areas like Laguna and Pampanga, including the

Kamikaze Pilot statue in Mabalacat [Fig. 2].<sup>11</sup> These sites commemorate Japanese soldiers who sacrificed their lives during World War II. These shrines serve to honor the valor and dedication of these soldiers and have become symbols of Philippine-Japanese reconciliation and friendship.

The establishment of these monuments coincides with strong diplomatic and economic relations, with Japan providing significant Official Development Assistance (ODA) to the Philippines. This support, funding major projects like Duterte's "Build, Build, Build" program, highlights Japan's strategic interest in fostering bilateral ties, often at the expense of addressing Filipinos' historical grievances.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, by honoring Japanese soldiers, these monuments create a narrative of mutual respect and economic partnership while downplaying the suffering of Filipinos during the occupation. This portrayal of Japanese valor facilitates diplomatic and economic cooperation but risks erasing the historical grievances that many Filipinos still feel. Thus, while these monuments promote reconciliation, they also raise questions about whose histories are honored and whose sufferings are obscured.

### The politics of memory: Balancing diplomatic relations and historical truth

The actions of the Philippine government regarding these monuments reflect broader diplomatic and economic strategies aimed at strengthening ties with Japan. The removal of the Filipina Comfort Women statue along Roxas Boulevard in Manila, and the proliferation of Japanese memorials in Luzon, can be seen as part of the calculated approach to maintain and enhance bilateral relations, which are economically beneficial.<sup>13</sup> Japan's significant contribution to the Philippine economy through ODA and investments plays a crucial role in shaping the country's infrastructure and economic landscape.

However, this approach creates a tension between maintaining friendly relations with Japan and addressing the historical injustices suffered by Filipinos during the Japanese occupation (1942-1945). The

government's prioritization of diplomatic and economic interests often comes at the expense of historical truth and justice for marginalized groups. The removal of the 'comfort woman' statue, for instance, not only erased the physical reminder of wartime atrocities but also the voices of survivors who continue to seek recognition and justice.

### Conclusion

Monuments play a crucial role in educating the public about history, offering tangible reminders of past events as well as providing sites for historical reflection. For instance, the Filipina Comfort Women statue in Manila, although short-lived, symbolized the resilience of Filipino women during the Japanese occupation. However, its removal represents a lost opportunity to remind the public of this painful chapter in Philippine history. Furthermore, monuments can serve as sites of dialogue and reconciliation, balancing the need to honor all aspects of history. While the Kamikaze Pilot memorial recognizes the valor of Japanese soldiers, true reconciliation requires recognizing and memorializing all victims of wartime atrocities.

The selective memorialization observed in the Philippines highlights the challenges of balancing historical truth with diplomatic and economic interests. It risks creating an imbalanced narrative that prioritizes diplomatic relations over justice for all affected groups.

In considering the role of monuments in shaping public memory and national identity, it is essential to ask: How can we ensure that monuments serve as inclusive and truthful representation of history? This question challenges us to reflect on the purpose of monuments and the importance of a balanced historical narrative. It invites us to explore avenues for establishing environments that acknowledge every dimension of history, while fostering learning, dialogue, and ultimately, reconciliation.

**Mar Lorence G. Ticao** is a research student in the Department of History at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Email: [mar.ticao@link.cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:mar.ticao@link.cuhk.edu.hk).

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- 10 Lila Ramos Shahani, *ibid.*, p. 82.
- 11 The Kamikaze Peace Memorial Shrine in Mabalacat, Pampanga, Philippines houses a monument with the Japanese and Philippine flags engraved on a wall (constructed in 2000), and a kamikaze pilot statue (erected in 2004). There used to be a marker describing the Kamikaze Corps, but it is no longer found on the site today. 'Kamikaze Pilot Statute (Mabalacat),' Kamikaze Images. <https://www.kamikazeimages.net/monuments/mabalacat-stature/index.htm>
- 12 Lila Ramos Shahani, *op. cit.* p. 86.
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# Monuments as Markers of History and Identity

## The Example of the Philippines

Ian Morley

Architecture students learn that the fundamental principles of building design and urban design are structure, form, material, space, function, and scale. In recent years, though, architectural pedagogy has expanded to include inquiry into the aesthetics and meaning of public sculpture and monuments.<sup>1</sup> Vital to this intellectual development has been Heritage Studies: the scholarly field has fostered awareness that aged artistic objects comprise a great proportion of the contemporary built fabric.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1 (left): A photo of the monument in Naga dedicated to the Fifteen Martyrs of Bicol. Unveiled in 1923, the monument is sited within the city's principal downtown plaza and, on January 4 of each year, a civic event is held to commemorate those killed in January 1897, given their participation in the native quest for liberty and self-rule. (Photo by the author, 2022)

Fig. 2 (above): Plaza de Roma, the *plaza mayor*, of Intramuros in Manila. In the foreground is a statue dedicated to the ruler of the Spanish Empire from 1788 to 1808, King Charles IV. It was erected in 1824 in gratitude of his decision to send the smallpox vaccine to the Philippine Islands. (Photo by the author, 2024)

Thanks to the rise of influential social movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), the character of present-day built environments has come under additional scrutiny. Consequently, particularly in the West, statues, monuments, and sculptures associated with the themes of slave trading and imperialism have been pulled down, vandalized, or are the subject of intense public debate re their potential relocation.<sup>3</sup> Given such discussion, questions have been tendered as to how exactly urban environments, culture, national identity, and the process of memorialization intertwine.

Accordingly, in some communities, a 'retain and explain' policy towards public sculpture and monuments has been introduced. Thus, no matter what their design form is, and whom they venerate, the preserving of artistic objects *in situ* is perceived by some to grant opportunity to learn more about past matters which today confront our sense-of-self and our understanding of social justice.

Notwithstanding statues and memorials being damaged and toppled in places such as Europe, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand, passionate protest during the past few years about what monuments

represent has, at best, had minimal effect in many parts of Asia. In previously colonized by the West (e.g., India), widespread calls have not yet yielded any successful removals of monuments from public sites.

Nevertheless, the lack of spirited remonstrance does not mean that the ghosts of past oppression have disappeared from the collective memory. To cite Anil Dharker of *The India Express*, Indians' grasp of their nation's history is still bound to the colonial-age statues that stand in public spaces.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in the Philippines, the public's awareness of their nation's past is still shaped by architectural objects erected before national independence in downtown environments [Fig. 1].

### Statues, decolonization, and present-day Asia

If one is to assume that the recent toppling of statues and monuments signals global societal commitment to decoloniality, then, given the historical narratives of many Asian nations, such activities should have been observable in large parts of the continent. But, to think along such lines about, for example, the Philippines – a place with a lengthy colonial history

(1565–1946) – is in fact flawed. Any belief that Filipinos en masse presently disapprove of commemorating historical figures who undertook actions that advocated colonial rule, is based on unfounded logic.<sup>5</sup>

To forge such an ungrounded presumption undermines, on the one hand, what colonial era monuments are perceived to commemorate in the postcolonial setting, and, on the other hand, it ignores how the nation's history has been framed by public education and the lengthy existence of monuments and statuary in towns and cities as part of this knowledge- and identity-building process [Fig. 2].

In short, the Philippine Islands boasts an enormous number of pre-1946 monuments. These, typically, are found in public spaces established by the Spanish and American colonizers as part of their efforts to redesign local towns and cities and, by doing so, exhibit the advancement of native civilization [Fig. 3].

In the case of the Spaniards, their imprint upon Philippine towns and cities derives from the application of the 1570s Laws of the Indies. Explained by Axel Mundigo and Dora Crouch to comprise 148 ordinances that dealt with every aspect of urban planning,<sup>6</sup> the Laws helped to accentuate Christian ideology in environmental form via the establishment

of church-lined *plaza mayors* (main plazas) at the center of each urban community.<sup>7</sup>

The importance of these public spaces to Philippine life cannot be underestimated: they were the center of local cultural activity, and they were the principal open areas around which the entire settlement's layout was arranged.<sup>8</sup> To accentuate the Christian character of urban communities, *plaza mayors* were often marked by religious iconography such as a wooden cross.

### Public spaces and statues: The Philippine context

To cite Donn Hart and Robert R. Reed, the distinct spatial form of settlements in the Philippines supplies physical evidence of past colonial authority.<sup>9</sup> In a place such as Manila – where from the late 1500s to late 1800s the Spanish colonizers lived alongside native, Chinese, Japanese, and other foreign populations – religious processions and fiestas held in plazas permitted rare occasions for *all people to come together as Manileños*, i.e., to unite with a single, shared identity. Similarly, after the commencement of American colonization in 1898, monuments were used as a tool to promote the unity of people as 'Filipinos.'





Fig. 3 (top left): The Anda Monument. Originally erected in 1871 but revitalized in 2020, the Anda Monument commemorates Simón de Anda y Salazar (1709-1776). He was a Spanish governor who played a critical role in resisting the British invasion of 1762-1764. (Photo by the author, 2023)



Fig. 4 (top right): The Rizal Monument in Manila. Constructed in 1913, Rizal's bones are interred into the base of the memorial. Each year, on December 30, the life of Rizal is commemorated by a ceremony led by the President of the Philippine Republic. (Photo by the author, 2024)

Fig. 5 (left): The statue of King Philip II of Spain in the Plaza de España, Intramuros. Erected in 1998, the monument commemorates the Spanish monarch at the time colonization of the Philippines began (in 1565) and, since that date, the notion of Philippine-Spanish friendship. (Photo by the author, 2024)

Under American colonial rule hundreds of new statues were built throughout the country. Usually sited in proximity to local government offices, such artistic features helped to demonstrate the new civic nature of society alongside the state-sponsored pride in being 'Filipino.' Indeed, monuments erected during the American colonial era were commonly dedicated to Filipino heroes, namely José Rizal (1861-1896), who was assassinated by the Spanish colonial administration for allegedly inciting rebellion. Rather, Rizal was a polymath whose writings exposed the broad Filipino desire at the end of the 1800s for social reform via peaceful means. Thus, the 'injustice' of his death in 1896 at the hands of an authoritarian colonial regime was exploited by the Americans to promote moral fortitude as part of the Philippines' post-Spanish/American-driven modernity and, so, 'progress.' Indeed, Rizal Monuments have in the American colonial and in the postcolonial milieus been read by the native population as expressions of their unity and pride, and to also reference their quest for social improvement; the social reform issues raised by Rizal in his writings still have relevance to Filipinos today, given profound socio-economic struggles within the country and the perceived inability of people, at times after national independence, to have 'voice' as to how society is managed.

So that different social groups could come together, the Americans passed laws to establish new civic celebrations, including to celebrate the anniversary of Rizal's death (December 30).<sup>10</sup> Not only were these events held in public spaces laid out in front of *presidencias* (municipal offices) or provincial capitols, these events also supplied occasions for public officials to make speeches, to collect money so as to fund new community initiatives, and for the public to build parade floats lauding bygone Filipino patriots.

In this milieu Rizal was promoted by the American colonizers to a near-deified status: the colonizers adhered to the viewpoint that every modern nation should have their own George Washington. For the Filipinos, the person selected by the Americans to be their 'father' was Rizal [Fig. 4].

### Philippine heritage and promoting tourism today

Lately, heritage awareness has become a fundamental part of both domestic and international tourism promotion in Manila.<sup>11</sup> Central to local tourism growth is the Spanish-era walled city known as Intramuros.<sup>12</sup>

Originally built during the late 1500s, Intramuros was the heart of politics, governance, and culture in the country and until 1898. The development of the tourism industry has helped present the district as the place where Filipinos gathered together as a coherent community. In this cultural frame Filipinos, and others who visit the historic site, view monuments in the walled city as an expression of how important the settlement once was. Significantly, too, by doing this, they begin to more deeply comprehend how the contemporary Filipino state of being has come about, and how the past has shaped the present in terms of making 'the modern Filipino' [Fig. 5].

As a result, the critique of the white, male master narrative presented by social movements such as BLM, whilst persuasive in some parts of the world, has gathered no momentum within Philippine society. Moreover, whilst in some countries, particularly those in the West, calls to remove/relocate monuments are considered necessary in order to diminish racism/social injustice, colonial-era monuments of Spanish monarchs and native heroes in the Philippines are conversely read somewhat differently. They, rather, "are perceived as commemorating individuals who promoted local development."<sup>13</sup>

In 2021, Filipinos celebrated the 500th anniversary of Ferdinand Magellan's arrival in the Philippine Archipelago. Whilst, in many parts of the world, people have turned their back on matters aligned to foreign invasions and the rise of imperialism, in contrast, in the Philippines 2021 was a year of national celebrations that allowed for a re-evaluation of what it is to be 'Filipino.'

In other countries, as indicated beforehand, social movements such as BLM have encouraged a rethink of how the past is remembered and memorialized within the built urban environment. In the Philippines, instead, interest in the past has reaffirmed the status of Intramuros as the site to view the evolutionary narrative of 'being Filipino' and, equally, to grasp how, through time, events occurring within the walled city have shaped the national chronicle.<sup>14</sup>

In this scaffold of thinking, colonial-era monuments therefore expose events and persons, good and bad, who played a role in shaping past-to-present Filipino identity. In other words, in the postcolonial milieu, individuals from the past inform of the 'development' that has affected what it means to be 'Filipino' today.

Ian Morley

is Vice Chair (External) of the Department of History at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

#### Notes

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# Promoting Nationhood by Urban Environmental Design

The Overlooked Filipino Architect-Planner, Antonio Toledo (1890-1972)

Ian Morley



Fig. 1 (above): The preliminary drawing by Antonio Toledo for the Monument of Unknown Heroes. (Image courtesy of the Archives of the Bureau of Public Works)



Fig. 2 (above): Toledo's 1939 Monument to General Gregorio del Pilar. (Image courtesy of the Archives of the Bureau of Public Works)

The disciplines of architectural history and planning history are littered with articles, papers, and books that focus upon 'star practitioners.' Yet, it is a well-known fact that the vast majority of buildings within urban settlements, and also the vast majority of town or city planning schemes, are designed by those not of high vocational standing. With regard to the practice of urban planning in the Philippines during the early 1900s, whilst much attention has been lavished upon Daniel Burnham (1846-1912) and his 1905 plans for Manila and Baguio, in actuality urban designing throughout the Philippine Archipelago was executed by William E. Parsons (1872-1939) and Filipinos such as Antonio Toledo (1890-1972). Still, in comparison to the volume of attention bestowed upon Burnham, little has been researched of Parsons, Toledo, and the like. Consequently, today, few details are known of their true impact upon the evolution of modern Philippine urbanism.

When analyzing the character of an urban planning system it is imperative to realize how its existence is grounded in particular decision-making processes. Therefore, when scrutinizing a planning system's form it is imperative, first, to grasp the means by which decisions affecting the laying out of buildings, roads, and open spaces are fashioned. Second, it is vital to know what the networks of information, actors, and power are that contribute to the urban environment's formation – and how.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of the Philippines' American colonial period (1898-1946), and in particular the short span of time within it known as the Commonwealth Era (1935-46), the local planning system was both designed and implemented by staff of the Bureau of Public Works' (BPW) Division of Architecture (DoA).

The DoA's activities were led by Filipinos from circa 1919. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s – hence by the commencement of the Commonwealth Era, when Filipino-led decolonization was practised – with their activities expanding in volumes, DoA personnel were engaged in a substantial number of urban design schemes. For example, the *Annual Report of the Secretary of Public Works and Communication* (1937) remarked that requests for plans from municipal and provincial governments, combined with applications for plaza, street, and park projects, were substantially higher than what they had previously been.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, notwithstanding such facts, the written history of the BPW during 1935 to 1946 is meagre. Owing to the lack of basic data on, for instance, architectural and planning activity during the Commonwealth

Era, a number of basic questions remain unanswered: Did the character of urban design change after 1935 owing to the nature of governance shifting? Post-1935, who undertook urban planning activity? Considering the need to answer such questions, this paper focuses upon an individual greatly downplayed within the historiography of Philippine society.

## Antonio Toledo: The underappreciated Filipino architect

Within the frames of Asian Studies and Philippine Studies, few scholars discuss/examine the career of Antonio Toledo.<sup>3</sup> Even within inquiries of Philippine architectural development, Toledo's name is typically written about in a manner secondary to that of Juan Arellano (1888-1960). As a case in point, the historiography of the American colonial-era presents Arellano as the innovator of local aesthetics, and, in accord, Toledo is merely presented as a supporting actor. This paper, to be blunt, challenges that standpoint. Utilizing findings from a monograph published in 2023,<sup>4</sup> this paper will explain that it was Toledo, not Arellano, who was central to the activities of the DoA during the Commonwealth Era.

In terms of context, two matters must be recognized when exploring the career of Toledo during the 1930s and 1940s. On one hand, it is necessary to appreciate what the Commonwealth Era was, and what it meant to the Filipinos who lived during it. On the other hand, it is crucial to realize that Toledo was hands-on when it came to facilitating urban betterment and

beautification in Manila and other Philippine places. In the case of improving the quality of the built fabric in Manila, *The Philippine Free Press* noted in 1938 that efforts were being made to supply the capital city with "better drainage, wider thoroughfares, more bridges across the Pasig River, cleaner esteros [estuarine inlets], and a healthier atmosphere."<sup>5</sup>

As someone responsible for designing road schemes, park layouts, plaza designs, and monuments, as earlier indicated, Toledo's professional influence went beyond the boundaries of the Philippines' capital city. In 1940, for instance, in Batac (Ilocos Norte), he proposed a more than six-metre-tall Monument to Unknown Heroes [Fig. 1], and, in keeping with the nationwide tradition started by the Americans during the early 20th century, he designed monuments dedicated to national hero José Rizal (1861-96).

He also proposed the Gregorio del Pilar Monument. To be erected at the Tila Pass in Ilocos Sur – the site of the Battle of Tirad Pass, which took place on December 2 1899 as part of the Philippine-American War – this new artistic feature sought to honour a hero of the Revolutionary Army and, more broadly, demonstrate respect to all Filipinos who had supported the late-1800s quest for national independence [Fig. 2].

## The Commonwealth Era, the new state, and planning

In broad terms, the colonial history of the Philippines is divided into two parts. The first part relates to the Spanish age (1565-1898). Succeeding the Spanish-American War of 1898, the second part is

the American period. It officially ended with the granting of Philippine independence in July 1946. However, during the time when the United States colonized the Philippine Islands, a number of notable cultural, legal, and political evolutionary phases transpired. One such advancement took place in mid-November 1935. At that time the Commonwealth, a Filipino-run administration described as "for and by the people," was established.<sup>6</sup> It was purposefully set up to prepare the country for impending self-rule.<sup>7</sup>

As the final chapter of the United States' colonial rule in the Philippine Archipelago – and, in conjunction, a new highpoint in the decolonization process kick-started during the first decade of the 20th century by the Filipinization of the colonial bureaucracy – the Commonwealth's creation was a political means to an end. It was, said its President, Manuel Quezon (1878-1944), a governmental instrument "placed in our hands to prepare ourselves fully for the responsibilities of complete independence" [Fig. 3].<sup>8</sup>

From 1935 the Commonwealth Government readily encouraged social progress: the welfare, happiness, and civil liberties of the public were keenly promoted by Quezon's administration. Stirred by the composing of a new constitution in early-1935, the public were given unprecedented support in their physical, mental, and social advancement.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the Commonwealth Era saw urban planning activity within the nation's more than 900 municipalities. As the Secretary of the Interior, Elpidio Quirino (1890-1956), outlined: "I advocated the policy of town planning not only to encourage the growth of civic pride in each locality but to also to stimulate them to pursue the policy of self-sufficiency."<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 3 (top): A Commonwealth Era sketch by Guillermo Tolentino, exhibited at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Manila, representing the political independence soon to be given to Filipinos by the Americans. (Photo by the author, 2023)

Fig. 4 (above): The south-facing elevation of the Agricultural and Commerce Building. Today the edifice is used by the National Museum of the Philippines as the Museum of Anthropology. (Photo by the author, 2023)



Fig. 5 (left): A view along Padre Burgos Avenue towards the west-facing elevation of the City Hall. (Photo by the author, 2024)

Fig. 6 (below): A scale model of Tolentino's Commonwealth Arch, held at the National Museum of Fine Arts. (Photo by the author, 2023)



## Toledo and his support of Commonwealth Era progress

The Filipino state's ambition after 1935 to uplift the physical and social character of urban communities, and so augment liveability, was an extension of environmental rationality introduced by the Americans at the start of the 20th century. Following Daniel Burnham's recommendations in 1905, new roadways, public edifices, and green spaces were laid out in Manila. But, to reiterate prior remarks, even though Toledo designed a range of projects during the 1920s and early 1930s, in written history he is habitually spoken of in terms of playing a secondary role to his DoA colleague, Juan Arellano [Fig. 4].

Such presentation of Toledo, and of Philippine urban design history in general, can be attributed to the grand narrative writing style established by Winand Klassen in the mid-1980s.<sup>11</sup> Klassen, and those subsequently writing in a similar vein, have tended to heap praise upon Arellano's career yet, at the same time, have downplayed Toledo's vocational accomplishments. As a result, much has been overlooked of what Toledo did to reshape the character of the Philippine urban form in the years preceding national independence.

By way of illustration, Toledo designed numerous road schemes, park projects, and prominent public edifices in Manila. In March and October 1939, he tendered proposals to revamp Dewey Boulevard. Today known as Roxas Boulevard, Toledo sought to incorporate green spaces and walkways alongside the roadway originally envisaged by Daniel Burnham as the capital city's 'Ocean Boulevard.'

Arguably his most ambitious roadway proposal – put forward in February 1940,

and completely ignored within the grand narratives of Philippine urbanism – was a 50-meter-wide 'Proposed Circumferential Road Around Manila, Philippines.' Comprising a monumental parkway, the scheme came to act as the precursor for the orbital roadways suggested in 1945 by Louis Croft in his *General Report of Major Thoroughfares* – i.e., the thoroughfares deemed vital to the post-World War Two redevelopment of Manila and vicinity. That roadway, today known as EDSA, acts as a major suburban thoroughfare and, given its heavy use, is renowned as one of the most congested traffic arteries in Metro Manila.

Aside from designing new roads and revamping existing ones, in order to boost accessibility between different districts in Manila, Toledo devised schemes to reshape road junctions. Furthermore, as noted above, he designed new green spaces within a capital city rapidly enlarging and densifying.

In August 1939, he composed a layout for Harrison Park (originally known as Malate Park). Seeking to change what was essentially a swamp into a new recreational hub, his park project incorporated a lagoon, winding pathways, and a bandstand. Prior to this, in May 1938, he composed a park alongside Calle Leveriza and Calle Indiana in the southern suburb of Pasay. With a symmetrical arrangement of lawns, pergolas, trees, and hedges, all organized from the centrally-positioned fountain, the Calle Leveriza Park's layout illustrated Toledo's expertise in the art of civic design. Such skills were further evident in downtown architectural schemes, such as for the City Hall and the Agriculture and Commerce Building sited in proximity to Manila's principal green space, Rizal Park.

The four-storey City Hall, completed in 1941, on Padre Burgos Avenue was the

largest of Toledo's Commonwealth Era buildings in the Philippines' largest city. Integrating a domed clock tower measuring almost 100 feet in height, the City Hall's enormous neo-classical bulk brought a new scale to the central cityscape. Sitting within an unencumbered site of almost 12,000 square meters area, the north-south oriented structure, once completed, formed an 'architectural wall' along one of Manila's primary inner city thoroughfares [Fig. 5].

Even though architectural critics during the time of the City Hall's construction alleged that the edifice was visually dowdy, it is often overlooked by scholars today that in September 1938 Administrative Order (AO) No. 78 was issued and Commonwealth Act No. 393 was passed. With Section 1 of the decree permitting the construction of a Commonwealth Triumphal Arch, the proposed structure – sited near the Legislative Building and City Hall – was to memorialize the inauguration of the Commonwealth,<sup>12</sup> and would have greatly elevated the visual character of Padre Burgos Avenue had it been completed prior to Imperial Japan's invasion and subsequent occupation.

To cost ₱500,000, the Commonwealth Triumphal Arch was designed by the 'conservative classicist'<sup>13</sup> Guillermo Tolentino (1890–1976) to resemble a *singkaban* (festival arch). The concrete structure – 27 metres high, 22 meters wide – was to be decorated with bronze figurines depicting historical native heroes as well as persons representing the present and future Filipino generations [Fig. 6].

Although largely unknown today, the Arch was not Tolentino's first venture to venerate the Commonwealth's existence: in late 1937, to honour the second anniversary of the Commonwealth's founding, and to celebrate the government's promotion of social virtues,

an array of sculptures – titled "Equality before the Law," "Labor," etc. – were erected at the downtown seafront space known as Luneta. These monuments, along with the Arch and various BPW projects undertaken before 1941 by Toledo, collectively informed Filipinos of political exertions underway to 'elevate' their nation's future.

With Manila's built environment reshaped after 1935 to help "knock the country back into shape,"<sup>14</sup> new public buildings, public spaces, and monuments were intentionally sited so as to be accessible and visible. Such practice evolved the City Beautiful model of urban planning imported to Southeast Asia by Burnham, one that from 1905 to 1935 symbolized (at least to the Americans) the values of modernity and democracy.

However, post-1935, the built environment was once more employed as a tool of the state, although now it was to articulate the values of Filipino unity and democracy – as largely personalized by President Quezon.<sup>15</sup> Only through the promotion of such values, he believed, could the Philippines secure its future.<sup>16</sup> Such rationale, exposes how key actors (e.g., Toledo, Tolentino, etc.) molded the bond between symbolic struggle and the unfolding political vision of 'a new city' in which Filipino structures and spaces, physically and figuratively, could be constructed.

Ian Morley

is Vice Chair (External) of the Department of History at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

### Notes

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Fig. 1 (left): Luneta Park in present-day Manila has long been a significant public space, dating back to the Spanish colonial era when it served as an execution ground. The strategic placement of the Rizal Monument at the centre of this historic park symbolizes the enduring legacy of the Filipino national hero, whose martyrdom fuelled the struggle for independence. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user PhiliptheNumber1 and reprinted under a Creative Commons License, 2024)

# Shaping a Nation in Stone

## Rizal and the Monuments of the Philippines' American Colonial Era

Claudia Isabelle Montero

The Philippine built environment has played a crucial role in shaping the legacy of José Rizal (1861-1896), the national hero. This is especially apparent when examining the history of American colonization in the Philippine Islands (1898-1946). Rizal's writings and execution by the Spanish not only catalyzed the Philippine Revolution but transformed him into a powerful nationalist symbol. To harness his popularity, U.S. colonial authorities erected Rizal monuments throughout the Philippine Archipelago, thereby portraying him as a model of cultural assimilation. However, many Filipinos during the early 1900s viewed the statues as symbols of resistance against foreign rule. The tension of how monuments were seen and used, to be brief, exposed how they were 'active participants' in contests regarding the evolution of Filipino national identity and consciousness. The Rizal monuments built during the early 1900s also reveal how the Philippine cityscape became a battleground for agencies seeking to shape and inform what 'being Filipino' entailed.

When the United States assumed control of the Philippine Islands following the Spanish-American War of 1898, one of the new colonial administration's first priorities was to establish, literally and figuratively, a 'visible presence.' During the following decades, the Philippines saw the emergence of monuments and statues honoring *pambansang bayani* (national heroes) – like José Rizal – so as to represent and celebrate Filipino nationhood.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of national heroes was especially apparent during the late 19th and early 20th centuries; it was an era marked by the Philippines' struggle for independence from Spanish colonial rule. Thus, as Filipinos sought to define their identity and assert independence, the need for heroic figures to inspire and bring the people together became evident. These heroes were to embody the *ideals, virtues, and aspirations* of 'being Filipino,' thereby serving as symbols of resistance, valor, and patriotism.

Indeed, after 1898 and the change in colonial regimes, monuments were employed not as mere decorative flourishes within Philippine built fabrics. Rather, they were purposefully constructed as tools for the American regime to project its power, to shape the Philippine national consciousness, and to set its legacy in the islands over which it now had political control. Yet, as this article explains, Rizal monuments took on numerous functions in the context of American colonization.

### The first monuments erected

After 1898, the construction of public monuments and the beautification of urban plazas emerged as a key strategy for the colonial government to shape national identity and civic consciousness. At the forefront of this effort was the strategy to erect Rizal monuments. Consequently, in lauding the Filipino national hero, statues

and monuments became a central feature of town squares and public parks across the archipelago.<sup>2</sup>

The drive for monument building and plaza beautification was shaped by multiple factors. One key motivation was the need to commemorate significant historical events, individuals, or milestones of cultural and national importance (as defined by the Americans).<sup>3</sup> The creation of beautified plazas also provided sites for civic activities and gatherings, often featuring bandstands that offered platforms for public performances and cultural events. In fact, these spaces became focal points for community engagement and civic participation, facilitating social interactions and fostering a sense of unity.<sup>4</sup>

Plazas – or 'People's Parks,' as they became known – served as gathering places for communities given that they provided open areas for local social, cultural, and political activities [Fig. 1]. Commonly, these endeavours were often supported by civic organizations, municipal governments, and private donors, who collaborated to fund and construct more monuments, parks, and other public spaces. From the American perspective, the erection of additional monuments and the laying out of more public spaces signaled the advancement of civilization.

The origins of Rizal monuments can be traced back to the early 20th century, when the American colonial government sought to erect a grand memorial to commemorate the life and legacy of Dr. José Rizal. Rizal, the renowned writer, physician, and revolutionary,

had been executed by the Spanish colonial authorities in 1896 in Manila, allegedly for his role in inspiring the Philippine independence movement of that year. His death, and subsequently the perception of his martyrdom, transformed him into a powerful symbol of Filipino nationalism thereby making him an 'ideal figure' for the Americans to promote as they sought to cultivate a new national identity among their colonial subjects.

The Rizal monument in Daet, Camarines Norte, erected on December 30, 1898, was the first such memorial erected and remains the oldest surviving one in the Philippines. In Manila, the capital city, one of the first monuments venerating the Filipino national hero was erected in 1910. This Rizal monument stands at the corner of Rizal Avenue and Alvarez Street in San Lazaro Park.

Financed through proceeds from the annual Philippine Carnival,<sup>5</sup> a colonial-era public festival, this monument honored the Filipino hero and became a prominent landmark in the city before it was transferred to San Lazaro Park. However, the city's first grand Rizal monument was dedicated in 1913 in Manila's downtown Luneta Park – today known as Rizal Park,<sup>6</sup> a large-sized public space that had been redesigned following the American architect-planner Daniel Burnham's recommendation in 1905 to remodel the layout and appearance of the Philippine capital city [Fig. 2]. Standing tall at the centre of the foremost green space in Manila's inner districts, the monument depicted Rizal in a heroic pose, with one hand resting on a book and the other gesturing defiantly.

The choice of location was strategic, as Luneta Park had long served as a gathering place for the people of Manila; it has a history of being used to host civic events, cultural performances, and political rallies, for instance. By situating the Rizal Monument at the heart of this public space, the colonial authorities sought to embed the image of the national hero into every aspect of Filipino civic life.

The highly-visible monument was to serve as a focal point for the Filipino people, who would visit Luneta Park to commemorate the anniversary of Rizal's birth and death, to pay tribute to his memory, and to reaffirm their sense of national identity. However, in light of the design of the monument by Richard Kissling, Rizal's role in the Philippine Revolution against Spain was largely downplayed; the monument's form and engravings instead emphasized his execution by the Spanish authorities – a narrative that served to position the United States as the Philippines' liberator from Spanish colonial oppression.

### The Rizal Monument phenomenon

The development of public spaces played a crucial role in the placement and visibility of colonial-era monuments like the Rizal Monument of downtown Manila. Act 3482 (1928) assigned the Director of the Bureau of Public Works (BPW) the task of creating overarching urban plans for the upkeep and future growth of provincial towns and cities. These urban development designs ensured

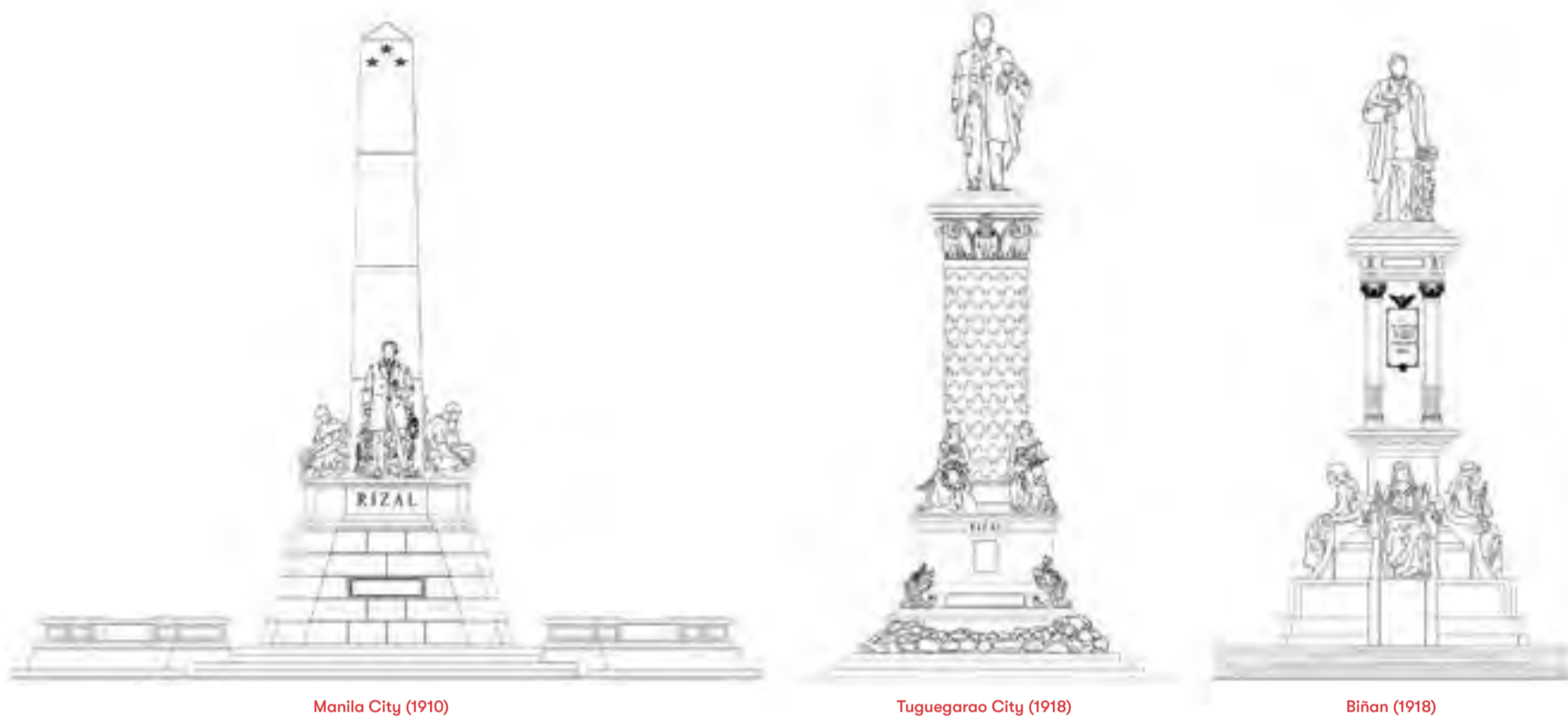


Fig. 3 (left): The iconic Rizal Monument in Manila's Luneta Park inspired the proliferation of similar statues honouring the Filipino national hero across the archipelago during the early 20th century. These monuments, erected in town squares, public gardens, and school grounds, reflected the architectural styles and ornamentation prominent during the 1910s, and showcased the regional diversity of Philippine commemorative art as well as the enduring legacy of José Rizal. (Photo by the author, 2024)

that public places, infrastructure, and architectural features were all aesthetically integrated. The strategic location of the Rizal Monument in Manila's prominent Luneta Park was no exception, with this iconic statue of the Filipino national hero standing at the centre of the carefully redesigned and landscaped public space.

The influence of the Rizal Monument extended far beyond the capital; replicas and adaptations of the iconic statue began to appear in town plazas, public parks, and school campuses across the Philippine archipelago. These monuments became a prominent feature of the colonial landscape, serving as visual reminders of Rizal's centrality to the project of Filipino nationhood [Fig. 3].

The widespread presence of the Rizal Monument was consequently not arbitrary; the American colonial regime recognized the power of "public art and architecture to shape the attitudes and behaviors" of the Filipino populace.<sup>8</sup> By populating the colonial landscape with images of Rizal, the authorities sought to mold the Filipino citizenry in the image of their national hero – instilling values of learning, self-improvement, and civic engagement.<sup>9</sup> Of significance, too, these monuments still stand and still inform the populous today in the postcolonial setting as to their identity as "Filipinos."

To bolster Rizal's importance, events in his life as well as his writings were carefully curated and promoted by the colonial authorities as exemplars of the ideal Filipino citizen. For example, his commitment to education, his advocacy for social reform, and his non-violent approach to the independence struggle were all held up by the Americans as

virtues to be emulated by the Filipino people.

The Rizal Monument, in Manila and subsequently elsewhere, became a physical embodiment of social ideals, thereby serving as a constant visual prompt for Filipinos – irrespective of gender, age, wealth, and social class – to cultivate the same qualities of character and civic-mindedness.

At the same time, the construction of Rizal monuments also provided a "limited outlet" for the expression of Filipino identity and agency within the colonial system. While the American authorities maintained tight control over the broader monument-building program, in allowing for the celebration of Rizal as a Filipino national figure, it permitted Rizal monuments to become hubs for Filipino people to enact their grasp of Filipino civic identity. In other words, whilst the colonial authorities sought to harness monuments of Rizal for their own nation-building agenda, in Filipino eyes, as time unfolded, such architectural features acquired new meanings with regard to national consciousness and nationhood – meanings determined by themselves, not the Americans.

Rizal monuments stand as complex symbols of the American colonial experience in the Philippines. On the one hand, these architectural objects were tools employed by the American regime to shape Filipino citizens in the image of their national hero, inculcating values such as self-learning, self-improvement, and civic engagement. Yet on the other hand, monuments came to serve as rallying points for the expression of Filipino nationalism, in so doing providing platforms for the celebration of local identity and the cultivation of a shared sense of

national consciousness. In this way, the Rizal Monument in Manila, as a case in point, highlights the inherent tensions and contradictions of the American colonial project in the Philippine Islands. So, while the Americans sought to exert control over the Filipino populace, they were ultimately unable to fully suppress the deep-rooted nationalist sentiments that found expression through the veneration of Rizal and the reclamation of public spaces for the performance of a distinctly Filipino civic identity.

### Monumental legacy: Monuments as symbols of (national) Filipino identity

The evolution of monument building in the American colonial Philippines reflects the broader arc of the colonial experience itself. From the initial efforts to solidify American power, to the gradual recognition of Philippine nationalism, to the ultimate transition to independence, the shifting landscape of seeing, reading, and using monuments serves as a tangible embodiment of the political, social, and cultural transformations that the country underwent during the 1900s prior to the onset of World War II in 1941.

Through the careful curation of public space and via the formation of collective memory, the American colonial authorities intended to (re)shape the very foundations of Philippine national identity. Yet, as the monuments built during the early 1900s testify, this was a project fraught with tension and contestation, i.e. a constant negotiation between the colonizer and the colonized.

The legacy of the Rizal Monument in Rizal Park, Manila, and those erected in other towns and cities throughout the country, continues to resonate in the Philippines today. The monuments stand and serve as potent symbols of the country's complex colonial past and the ongoing struggle to define the contours of what Filipino nationhood is, and is not.

As the nation grapples with the aftereffects of its colonial experiences, Rizal monuments in plazas and other public spaces stand as a testament to the power of public art and architecture to shape the collective consciousness of a people – and to the enduring capacity of that consciousness to assert itself, even in the face of the most formidable colonial impositions in the postcolonial setting.

As the Philippines looks back on this complex historical legacy, the monuments that dot its cityscapes continue to hold profound significance. They stand as lasting reminders of the nation's struggle for self-determination, as well as the enduring influence of its colonial past held by Spain and the United States. In studying the country's silent stone sentinels, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of how the built and designed environment can become

a battleground for the shaping of national consciousness. Moreover, it reveals that any such battle can never truly be won. Rather, it is perpetually reenacted through the artistic objects that seek to define a nation's public spaces.

**Claudia Isabelle Montero**

is presently completing her PhD study in the Department of History at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, where she previously completed her MPhil degree. Her ongoing research project investigates the intricate dynamics surrounding monuments and civic spaces in the Philippines, with a particular focus on their relationship within the context of American colonial urbanism. Email: [claudia.montero@cuhk.link.edu.hk](mailto:claudia.montero@cuhk.link.edu.hk)

#### Notes

- 1 Morley, Ian. *Cities and Nationhood: American Imperialism and Urban Design in the Philippines, 1898-1916*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2018.
- 2 *The Quarterly Bulletin of the Bureau of Public Works*. Vol. 2 No. 4, January 1, 1914.
- 3 Act No. 243. "An Act granting the right to use public land upon the Luneta in the City of Manila upon which to erect a statue of Jose Rizal, from a fund to be raised by public subscriptions, and prescribing as a condition the method by which such subscriptions shall be collected and disbursed" Passed September 28, 1901.
- 4 Hart, Donn Vorhis. *The Philippine Plaza Complex: A Focal Point in Culture Change*. New Haven: Yale University, Southeast Asia Studies, 1955.
- 5 The Philippine Carnival was an annual event organized by the American colonial authorities in the Philippines to promote tourism and highlight the progress of the islands under U.S. rule. A portion of the carnival's earnings were set aside to fund public works projects, including the construction of the first Rizal monument in Manila.
- 6 From its early days, Luneta was a place of strategic importance, and over time, its seafront siting evolved to cater to the Spanish leisure class. However, it was during the latter years of Spanish colonial rule the Luneta became infamous for public executions, including that of prominent Filipino nationalists.
- 7 Act No. 3482. "An Act to clarify the functions and powers of the Director of Public Works relative to the planning of cities and municipalities of the Philippine Islands, and for other purposes." Passed December 7, 1928.
- 8 Ralph Harrington Doane, "Architecture in the Philippines," *The Quarterly Bulletin of the Bureau of Public Works*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1918.
- 9 An advertisement put forward by the Philippine Education Co. Inc. selling Rizal's photograph. *The Philippine Magazine*. Vol. 28. No.1. December 1931.



Fig. 2 (above): This historic photograph captures the transformation of the public plaza in Maasin, Leyte in 1938. Once a simple open square, the plaza has been redesigned as a vibrant gathering space where President Manuel Quezon is seen addressing a crowd of local residents. (Source: Sabatino de La Vanguardia. Manila. 18 June 1938.)

# Home and the World at Museum Van Loon

A Conversation on Curation and Colonial History with Thomas Berghuis

Paramita Paul

Thomas Berghuis is a curator and historian of Asian art based in the Netherlands. Berghuis recently curated the exhibition *Home and the World* in Museum Van Loon, an historical building in the canal district of Amsterdam. In this exhibition, fourteen contemporary artists from all over the world used different spaces of the Van Loon canal house to explore the intricate connections between colonialism and nationalism, past and present. In this conversation, Berghuis elaborates on the themes of the exhibition, on its peculiar location, and on the importance of alternative perspectives on how to feel at home in a world beyond the colonial state and the nation-state. In addition to thanking Thomas Berghuis for this interview, we are grateful to Johan Kuiper and Victor van Drielen at the Museum Van Loon for providing images and soundbites from the exhibition.



Fig. 1 (left) and fig. 2 (above): *One Hundred and Nineteen Deeds of Sale* (2018), by Sue Williamson. (Photography by Thijs Wolzak courtesy of Museum Van Loon, 2024)

**Paramita Paul (PP):** Let me start our conversation today by sketching a scene for you: I am standing in Museum Van Loon's garden, a beautiful, green, and quiet space between the main Van Loon house on the Keizersgracht canal in Amsterdam, and the coach house, which is also part of the Van Loon premises. Hung to dry in the garden are white cotton work garments. At first glance, there is nothing strange about them, except for the fact that it is slightly odd to find laundry hung to dry in a museum garden. Upon closer inspection though, we notice that each of the garments contains the personal information of an individual, including their name, gender, age, and place of birth, as well as their buyer, their seller, and their price. The piece of cloth I am looking at mentions the name of "Dominga" from Bengal, who was sold by Cornelis Kelleman to Jan Dircx de Beet in 1693. For me, this artwork, *One Hundred and Nineteen Deeds of Sale* by Sue Williamson, was one of the most poignant pieces in your exhibition. Can you elaborate on this piece and use it to introduce the overall theme of *Home and the World*?

**Thomas Berghuis (TB):** Museum Van Loon is also well known for its garden. But for a lot

of people, including some of the artists that participated in the exhibition, the house of the Van Loon family, as well as other houses in this context – they're almost haunted houses, because of the colonial history, imperial history, and, as this exhibition is proposing, also a national history. [...] So the piece of Sue Williamson is one of the keys in linking various histories. It connects, first of all, to the memorial year of the abolition of slavery in what they call the Dutch Kingdom – so the commemoration of 150 years since the abolition of slavery. What Sue Williamson has done is that she's been exploring various histories.

After 1815 when the Dutch Kingdom is founded, the Van Loon family is very close to the Dutch Kingdom. They also are part of the Dutch trade organization, *Nederlandsche Handelsmaatschappij*. They are actually at the table to advise companies and advise traders on the cultivation system in Indonesia or what have you. They build up during the East India Company, West India Company, to continue that as a state enterprise and as an enterprise linked to the Dutch Kingdom. A lot of colonial histories and colonial archives are now being explored and being opened up.

**PP:** Another central theme in *One Hundred and Nineteen Deeds of Sale* and across the exhibition is the connection between the individual and the world. How does the exhibition approach that connection?

**TB:** All of the works in the exhibition – I started to realize when we built them up and when we hosted them in Museum Van Loon – have a very personal touch and a personal link to the artist that made the work. Researchers connected to IIAS will recognize that space when you're alone in an archive and you're doing this tedious work; that's what these artists are doing as well, and they created out of that artworks that become very personal like in the case of Sue Williamson. Another example which is a very personal work is the work that is in the Carriage House of Van Loon: *The Patterns of Displacement in the Context of Home*, which asks us to reflect on the notion of home and having a home in the world. It brings us into contact with a refugee tent cut into pieces, each piece has the name of a refugee on it. [...] What I'm hoping with this exhibition is that eventually we start to realize that there may be not only decolonial strategies, but also de-national strategies,

and those de-national strategies really de-linking the nation-state are necessary in terms of what I want: urgent calls for solidarity, communities, society of solidarity, international solidarity as well as local regional solidarity. I'm not the only one, I mean Rabindranath Tagore – who is a part of this exhibition – he was also searching for that.

**PP:** You introduced Tagore basically in the first room of the main building, where there is an area dedicated to the renowned poet, writer, and philosopher whose 1913 novel *Ghare Baire*, or "At Home and Outside", inspired your exhibition *Home and the World*. Can you introduce us briefly to Tagore's ideas in *Ghare Baire*? How were his ideas relevant at the time of publication versus now?

**TB:** There's a tremendous amount of studies written on the history of the British Empire, and there's a lot of studies written on the history of the nation and Tagore's change, but after *Ghare Baire* he writes a series of lectures, in which one is on the nation, and that's where he really compares the nation-state, a Western construct but also a construct of power and greed to a country and its people. This is what the crux is of



Fig. 3 (top left): *Epicycles IV & V* (2021), by Jitish Kallat.

Fig. 4 (top right): *Kerubut* (2024), by Iftikhar Dadi & Elizabeth Dadi

Fig. 5 (below left): *KANAVAL* (1995 - ongoing), by Leah Gordon

Fig. 6 (below right): *Mom* (2024), by Minouk Lim

(All Photography by Thijs Wolzak courtesy of Museum Van Loon, 2024)



Tagore in the 20th century. I'm not an expert on Tagore at all, but what I find important is that amidst this thinking, thinking of a possible future, he establishes in 1901 a world school in Santiniketan and that later becomes a university. He travels the world and speaks to a lot of other intellectuals. He sees the rise of ultra-nationalism. So this is what Tagore sees, and he sees it as a big problem for the world ahead, and I'm saying basically by bringing his words back he was right and we should listen to him. I mean, I couldn't have imagined the world that we are living in today when I started this exhibition even seven years ago. The amount of nationalism that has arisen since 2017 has been frightening.

**PP:** Each artist subtly appropriates a particular area of the building – subtly, yet with clear links for the viewer to see all kinds of connections. The sort of obvious elephant in the room is the museum building, the Van Loon house, as the center for all of this. In 1602 William van Loon was one of the founders of the Dutch East India Company, and his descendants still live on the canal house's upper floors. It is very intriguing to organize this exhibition at that particular site. Can you say more about the marriage of that place of the museum and *Home and the World*?

**TB:** It's fortunate that the family – Philippa Van Loon and Martine Van Loon – is very open to this process, so both have said that what is being done by these artists is absolutely necessary and they find it meaningful and intriguing. The other fortunate thing in with working with Museum Van Loon is that it's a small team of very dedicated people, and they realize these interwoven histories, speak to the people that visit the museum, and are open to questions.

**PP:** *Home and the World* is not your first project at Museum Van Loon. At the end of our conversation today, I'd like to look ahead and focus on your current collaboration with Museum van Loon called *Wereldschool*, in which you are working with international partners across different continents. What is the *Wereldschool*, and how will you develop it in the coming years?

**TB:** So the *Wereldschool*, the World School, is basically a proposition that originates with Tagore, in the sense that he set up a nest in which the world comes together in Santiniketan. And I was thinking, what could we do today to both honor his ideas, as well as to extend it? What would Tagore have

done? Tagore was very much aware that he was of a privileged class, so he could travel and be in touch with other intellectuals. But I think what he meant to do was to bring people together, also lower classes and people who don't have that privilege that he had. And I was thinking, what would he do today? What I decided – following inspiration from collective initiatives in art and culture in Southeast Asia and South Asia – is that a lot of artists are saying we should create viral systems and systems of hacking. The World School is something that everyone can claim, can own, can run, can disseminate. We are creating four time slots of two hours online, on one single line. We made these time slots open, open for participation and leading from a keynote, which is often done by one of the artists in the exhibition. The conversations are open and unrecorded, so that it allows the possibility of bringing especially young scholars as well as arts professionals and their community members together in an open, conversational, safe environment. And we talk about the possibility of leading communities of solidarity beyond and after the nation-state. So, we're a bit rebellious, I guess. [...] But important with the World School, I'm now saying that research, archival research, transhistoric research,

intercultural, transcultural research, should be taken collectively. Let's create open-source environments for research, in which text-based researchers can play a role, but also image-based researchers, so contemporary artists can play a role. It's being tested now in the Netherlands. There is talk of a new collective in which artists, art and scientific research will collaborate. But I'm very critical of this new endeavor that is being led by an exclusive view and an exclusive group of people, because it's very technical. And what I think we need is to protect humanities. So yes, here we are talking from IIAS, which is within the context of the humanities, the arts, arts and society, arts and politics. And these are the fields that we should endorse. And I'm seeing within the current world a lot of emphasis being done on the hard sciences, the technical sciences, including in the relationship to art. So let's work with artists.

This transcript has been heavily edited and abridged. The original audio includes a wealth of further details and discussion. To hear to the full conversation, listen and subscribe to *The Channel* podcast: <https://iias.asia/the-channel>

# Philosophy for Engineers

IIT Gandhinagar Experience

Jaison Manjaly

Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), currently numbering 23, are some of India's most well-funded, competitive, and research-focused technology institutions. After Independence, the Nehru government decided to set up the four IITs – Kharagpur, Bombay, Madras, and Kanpur – on the recommendation of the Sarkar Committee. The objective was to empower independent India with trained engineers to meet its developmental aspirations. The Sarkar Committee report outlined the nature, structure, and curriculum of the IITs, designating the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as the model for these aspirational science-based engineering and technology institutions.



Fig. 1: Jaison Manjaly interacting with undergraduate students. (Photo courtesy of Devarsh Barbhaya, 2022)

As a Professor of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Gandhinagar, a second-generation IIT, I have been teaching 'Introduction to Philosophy' as a core Liberal Arts course since the inception of the Institute in 2008. The curriculum across IITs includes provisions for Liberal Arts, promoting a more inclusive educational approach. However, the number of credit requirements varies across institutions. It has been challenging and, at the same time, transformative to engage the engineering community at IITGN with Liberal Arts and its relevance to the overall academic experience and futuristic possibilities. The primary objective of this essay is to provide context and perspective on the Liberal Arts courses at IITGN, specifically my experiences and encounters with teaching philosophy to engineering undergraduate students.

Since the establishment of the first IIT in Kharagpur in 1951, the IITs have evolved into premier institutions known globally for their rigorous academic programs and research. Admission to IITs is highly competitive, with students needing to clear the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE), one of the toughest entrance exams in the world. The IITs have become renowned, mainly due to the remarkable achievements of their alumni, both in India and particularly in the United States. This reputation is not just a result of the academic prowess of the graduates; it also stems from the robust institutional framework. The autonomy and transparency embedded in the IIT system have played a pivotal role in making these institutions accessible to a broader demographic, including those from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds and the middle class.

The undergraduate program at IITs has gained such prestige that preparation for the JEE often begins as early as the eighth grade. This early start is driven by the competitive nature of the exam, social prestige, and parental and peer pressure.

As a result, students frequently migrate to coaching hotspots, such as Kota and Hyderabad, known for their specialized JEE coaching centers. This migration and the intense focus on exam preparation have significant implications for the overall learning patterns, outcomes, and well-being of students. In terms of learning patterns, the JEE preparation requires only an advanced ability to crack multiple-choice questions in physics, chemistry, and mathematics. The coaching industry for JEE has evolved into a billion-dollar enterprise in India, exerting considerable influence over the broader educational landscape. Schools and other educational institutions often feel compelled to align their curricula with the demands of the coaching industry, leading to what can be termed a JEE-driven educational framework. This framework dictates not only what students should learn but also what non-essential "distractions" should be minimized or eliminated.

One of the most significant casualties of this JEE-centric education framework is the marginalization of liberal arts and sports. These are often deemed non-essential for cracking the JEE and are consequently neglected or eliminated from the school curriculum. This elimination, however, is not without consequences. It narrows the educational experience, depriving students of a holistic education that fosters critical thinking, creativity, and socio-emotional intelligence. The impact of this system extends beyond curricular choices. The pressure to succeed in the JEE has led to the emergence of "dummy schools," where students are nominally enrolled but rarely attend classes. Instead, they focus solely on JEE preparation, often under the aegis of coaching institutes. These ghost schools represent a significant shift in the educational design, where the traditional role of schools as centers of holistic learning is undermined in favor of a single-minded pursuit of engineering college admissions. Hence, most

students entering the IIT system have minimal exposure to curiosity-driven engagement with the liberal arts.

The predominant motivation for preparing for the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) is often to secure a place in these prestigious institutions rather than a genuine passion for the subjects. It is also driven by the possibility of securing a high-paying job immediately after the undergraduate program. During the 2023-2024 academic year, approximately 1.5 million students appeared for the JEE, with the majority having undergone at least two years of intensive coaching. These students excel in multiple-choice logical-mathematical problem-solving, a skill honed through rigorous training. This narrow focus leads to cognitive fatigue and a conditioned worldview. As a result, students often find domains of learning outside this framework challenging and uninteresting. For instance, these students struggle significantly if asked to write an essay or to analytically engage with abstract questions. This learning disparity highlights a critical issue: the need for a broader educational approach that cultivates diverse cognitive abilities.

Recognizing these challenges among incoming students, IIT Gandhinagar (IITGN) has embarked on a mission to transform its undergraduate education. The goal is to enable IITGN students who are not only proficient in logical-mathematical problem-solving but also adept at addressing complex problems in social, scientific, and engineering domains. This requires skills such as divergent thinking, design approaches, open-ended problem-solving, thought experiments, the art of argumentation, curiosity-driven learning, encounters with various art forms, and creative thinking. To achieve this holistic educational vision, IITGN has implemented several initiatives. These include a foundation program, general education and liberal arts courses, and a physical education program. Each initiative is designed to offer broad-based education and interdisciplinary engagement.

The 'foundation program' is a four-week, full-time induction program that aims to acclimatize incoming undergraduate students to the broader thinking process, including domains like leadership skills, societal engagement, ethics, and interdisciplinary academic pursuits. A significant initiative involves integrating substantial liberal arts course requirements into the undergraduate engineering curriculum. This inclusion mandates that at least 20 percent of the existing curriculum be dedicated to liberal arts and general education courses.

"The Slate" is devoted to pedagogy and educational praxis, both in and beyond the classroom. This section is meant to be a space for educators and researchers to explore the debates, practices, challenges, and opportunities of 21st-century education. "The Slate" can take many forms, encompassing everything from personal reflections to practical resources for educators (e.g., syllabi, field exercises, etc.), from critical essays on traditional education to experimental teaching strategies. With this section, we seek perspectives that decolonize conventional curricula and pedagogies. Through socially and civically engaged approaches, the section aims to foster alternative models for education that are grounded in contemporary experience and which strive towards greater accessibility, innovation, and critical engagement.

One such mandatory course has been "Introduction to Philosophy," which provides a foundational understanding of philosophical concepts and critical thinking skills. As the instructor of this course since the Institute's inception in 2008, I have had the privilege of teaching all undergraduate students graduated from IIT Gandhinagar. Teaching philosophy to engineering students, while not uncommon, was a new experience for me when I began. There were 90 students in my class in 2009, and today, it is close to 400 students. I initially struggled to engage them and spark their interest in philosophy. However, when I viewed my class as a theater of philosophy, it changed everything. Central to this theater is the performance of discussions and debates that challenge dogmatic thinking and fundamental assumptions, seeking to define ostensibly inconsequential ideas and concepts that are otherwise considered simple, mundane, and "understood." To make philosophy more accessible and engaging, I incorporate real-life examples and anecdotes into my lectures. This approach helps simplify abstract concepts and demonstrates how these concepts emanate from lived experiences. By contextualizing philosophical ideas, students can see the relevance of these ideas to their own experiences. As part of the course, I incorporate the screening of four selected films: *12 Angry Men*, *The Matrix*, *Judgment at Nuremberg*, and *Jai Bhim*. Each film serves a distinct educational purpose, contributing to the course's overarching goal of fostering critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and a nuanced understanding of philosophical concepts.

*12 Angry Men* is instrumental in sensitizing students to logical fallacies. This classic film portrays a jury deliberating the guilt or innocence of a defendant, highlighting how personal biases, emotional appeals, and flawed reasoning can influence decision-making. Through the characters' interactions, students learn to identify and critique logical fallacies such as ad hominem attacks, false dilemmas, and hasty generalizations. This film serves as a practical demonstration of the importance of rigorous, unbiased reasoning in reaching sound conclusions. *The Matrix* introduces students to alternative possibilities, thought experiments, and counterfactual thinking. The film's premise – a dystopian reality where humans live in a simulated world – challenges viewers to question the nature of reality and the reliability of their perceptions. This aligns with philosophical discussions on skepticism, the nature of consciousness, and metaphysics. By engaging with the film's narrative, students explore thought experiments similar to René Descartes' evil demon hypothesis or Hilary Putnam's brain in a vat scenario, encouraging their ability to entertain and critically analyze radical philosophical ideas.



*Judgment at Nuremberg* and *Jai Bhim* are pivotal in introducing the art of argumentation and the concept of justice. *Judgment at Nuremberg* recounts the post-World War II trials of Nazi war criminals, delving into complex ethical questions about responsibility, obedience, and the nature of justice. It provides a historical context for discussing moral relativism, the principles of just war theory, as well as the legal versus moral obligations of individuals. Through the powerful courtroom arguments, students learn the structure of persuasive argumentation, the importance of evidence, and the ethical complexities of justice. *Jai Bhim*, on the other hand, focuses on contemporary issues of social justice and legal advocacy in India. The film follows the struggle of marginalized communities seeking justice within a flawed legal system. It offers a compelling narrative that addresses themes of systemic discrimination, human rights, and the rule of law. By examining the film, students gain insights into the practical application of justice theories, the role of empathy in ethical reasoning, and the significance of legal and social reforms in achieving equitable outcomes.

Films, being a popular and engaging medium among students, significantly facilitate the contextualization of the content and objectives of the course. They bridge the gap between abstract philosophical concepts and real-world applications, making the material more relatable and comprehensible. Film screenings in the curriculum create an immersive learning experience that not only captivates students' interest but also deepens their understanding of critical philosophical issues.

While teaching philosophy, I realized that it is insufficient to merely cover topics like metaphysics and epistemology. It is crucial to examine and evaluate students' metaphysical and epistemic worldviews. Just as learning engineering requires designing experiments to test its premises, philosophy necessitates exploring broader topics like knowledge, mind, truth, God, empathy, and justice through thought experiments. These exercises have proven effective in engaging students in discussions and encouraging them to think critically about their beliefs. For instance, discussions on the nature of knowledge can involve examining the classic Gettier problem, which challenges the traditional definition of knowledge as justified true belief. By considering scenarios where one has a justified true belief that does not constitute knowledge, students can explore the nuances of epistemology and the conditions under which knowledge is obtained.

Similarly, exploring the mind-body problem can lead to engaging in thought experiments such as the "philosophical zombie" or the "Chinese room," through which students can delve into the complexities of consciousness and the relationship between mental and physical states. In examining the concept of justice, students can engage with various theories, including utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics. Thought experiments like the "trolley problem" can help students understand the ethical implications of different actions and the trade-offs involved in decision-making processes.

Engaging students and the broader community in philosophical discussions presents significant challenges, particularly when the topics conflict with their existing beliefs and frameworks. Students often react with immediate denial when confronted with ideas that challenge their worldview, such as the possibility that mental functions are identical to brain functions, the notion that mathematics is a language representing reality like any other language, or the idea that experience is not a necessary condition for knowledge. The primary challenge lies in encouraging students to entertain scenarios that do not necessarily align with their preconceived notions. I encourage students to challenge dogmatic beliefs and question fundamental assumptions. Through structured debates and discussions, students learn to articulate their ideas clearly, consider alternative viewpoints, and develop a deeper understanding of complex issues. This process not only enhances their philosophical acumen

but also cultivates essential skills such as analytical thinking, effective communication, and collaborative problem-solving.

I have sought to innovate the course evaluation method to better align with the objectives of the "Introduction to Philosophy" course. Attendance at sessions is not mandatory, allowing students to choose how they engage with the material. However, those who attend class regularly can earn up to 20 percent of their grade, recognizing the value of active participation in discussions. Another 20 percent of the grade is allocated for journal writing and library visits. Students who write a 500-word essay each week on a philosophical topic and visit the library at least three times a week can earn these marks. This encourages consistent engagement with philosophical literature and reflective writing. A significant portion of the grade (30 percent) is based on a one-on-one conversation with the instructor at the end of the semester. During this conversation, students discuss topics of their interest, demonstrating their understanding and ability to engage with philosophical concepts. This personalized evaluation method allows for a more nuanced assessment of the students' intellectual growth and engagement with the course material. The remaining 30 percent of the grade is assigned to two written assignments, one due before the mid-semester and the other after. These assignments require students to explore philosophical issues in depth, apply critical thinking skills, and articulate their ideas coherently. This innovative evaluation approach aims to balance structured assessments with flexible, student-centered learning opportunities. By incorporating diverse methods of evaluation, the course encourages students to engage with philosophy in ways that go beyond traditional exam-based assessments.

People within and outside IIT Gandhinagar are often surprised to learn that I teach "Introduction to Philosophy" to undergraduate engineering students. Their surprise stems from the perceived incongruity of having a philosophy professor and a philosophy course at an IIT, which, according to them, is primarily focused on engineering and technology. They also hold misconceptions about philosophy, viewing it as esoteric or synonymous with spirituality, religion, or abstract discussions about life and the divine. When I engage in conversations about my role, a common question arises: Do I teach Western philosophy or Indian philosophy? My response has been that philosophy transcends geographical or cultural boundaries; it is fundamentally an approach and inquiry into the essential aspects of existence and thought. Philosophy encompasses a broad range of subjects, including facts, ideas, being, truth, knowledge, justice, god, mind, and self. Philosophy, in essence, encourages a deeper examination of the world around us. This inquiry is not confined to any tradition or culture but is a universal endeavor. By emphasizing that philosophy is an approach rather than a collection of doctrines, I try to highlight its relevance and applicability across different contexts and disciplines.

Further, they are keen to know: "What is the purpose of philosophy, and how is it important for engineering?" These are often not curiosity-driven questions but presumptive ones intended to trivialize humanities, social sciences, and liberal arts as irrelevant to engineering. This perception is common among engineering students, faculty, and parents. Many faculty members, products of the same educational and societal framework, have not been exposed to liberal arts education and are unsure of its relevance and potential impact. Another significant challenge is the faculty's understanding of liberal arts, often equating them with communication skills, writing, and management courses, which are viewed solely for their utility in professional development. This narrow perspective is compounded by the liberal arts faculty's minimal interdisciplinary engagement and inability to position themselves within a predominantly engineering and science academic environment. Many liberal arts faculty members are reluctant to innovate,

create new possibilities, or acknowledge the need for new pedagogical frameworks to address an audience different from typical university cohorts. Furthermore, their limited exposure to cross-disciplinary engagement often results in a failure to capture the imagination and attention of engineering and natural sciences students.

To create a truly interdisciplinary educational experience, it is crucial for faculty members from both engineering and humanities disciplines to actively engage with each other. This requires a willingness to step outside traditional disciplinary boundaries and collaborate on developing integrated curricula that highlight the interconnectedness of different fields. For example, co-teaching courses that combine engineering principles with ethical and social considerations can provide students with a more holistic understanding of their studies. Likewise, liberal arts faculty must be willing to innovate and adapt their teaching methods to resonate with engineering students. This might involve incorporating case studies, project-based learning, and interactive simulations that bridge theoretical concepts with practical applications. Additionally, embracing new technologies and digital platforms can enhance student engagement and facilitate more dynamic and interactive learning experiences.

Encouraging and facilitating cross-disciplinary research initiatives can also help bridge the gap between engineering and the humanities. By involving students in research projects that require both technical and philosophical insights, they can appreciate the value of integrating diverse perspectives. This approach not only broadens their academic horizons but also prepares them to tackle complex, real-world problems that require multifaceted solutions.

A significant hurdle in teaching philosophy to engineering students is overcoming their preconceived notions about the irrelevance of liberal arts. Engineering students often view these fields through a utilitarian lens, influenced by societal and educational frameworks that prioritize technical skills over critical and reflective thinking. To address this, I strive to make philosophical concepts relevant to their engineering studies and personal lives. For instance, I draw parallels between ethical theories and professional engineering ethics, highlighting how philosophical inquiry can inform their decision-making processes in real-world scenarios.

There is a prevailing belief that philosophy is not important to becoming an engineer. I do not contest this idea; in my opinion, philosophy is not a necessary condition for obtaining an engineering degree. However, it is an essential approach for evolving into a leader, which aligns with one of the major missions of IIT Gandhinagar. As an institution, we believe that the educational experience at IITGN enhances students' ability to be more creative thinkers rather than just technically proficient engineers. It is crucial to avoid logical fallacies, be empathetic, avoid prejudices, and understand foundational concepts. All of these skills collectively make students more effective in their professional and personal lives.

When philosophical ideas conflict with students' existing beliefs about religion, science, technology, and other aspects of their worldview, it can be excruciating for them to consider alternative possibilities, even if these alternatives are logically valid and sound. The instant dismissal of alternative possibilities often manifests deep-rooted biases and prejudices that they hold unconsciously, without malicious intent. Although students have been exposed to physics, chemistry, biology, and math, the underlying principles and frameworks of science and mathematics are quite new to them. For many, science is synonymous with solving equations or analyzing the properties of matter. The broader understanding of science as a framework to comprehend the world, a methodology of inquiry, and an ideological stance has never been part of their intellectual landscape. Incorporating philosophical inquiry into their education helps bridge this gap. Philosophy encourages students to question the assumptions underlying their knowledge and beliefs. For

instance, when discussing the philosophy of science, students can explore the works of Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn, who introduced concepts such as falsifiability and paradigm shifts. Understanding these concepts can lead students to appreciate science not just as a body of knowledge, but as a dynamic process of discovery and refinement of understanding.

Moreover, philosophical engagement fosters critical thinking and ethical reflection, which are crucial for leadership. Leaders in any field must navigate complex ethical landscapes, make decisions under uncertainty, and inspire others. By grappling with philosophical questions about morality, justice, and human nature, students develop a nuanced understanding of the ethical dimensions of their decisions. For example, discussions on utilitarianism versus deontological ethics can help future engineers consider the broader impact of their work on society and the environment.

Empathy is another essential quality for effective leadership. Philosophical inquiry into human nature, consciousness, and emotions can enhance students' ability to understand and relate to others. Topics in philosophy of mind and ethics can introduce concepts such as theory of mind and moral reasoning, helping students develop a more empathetic and inclusive perspective. This is particularly important in diverse environments where leaders must navigate various cultural norms and values.

Understanding foundational concepts across disciplines enriches students' intellectual versatility. Philosophy encourages interdisciplinary thinking by connecting ideas from different fields. For instance, examining the philosophical implications of quantum mechanics or artificial intelligence can inspire students to think beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and innovate at the intersections of knowledge. Engaging with the works of philosophers like Alan Turing, who contributed to both philosophy and computer science, or Niels Bohr, who explored the philosophical implications of quantum physics, can illustrate the profound connections between disciplines.

While philosophy may not be essential for becoming an engineer, it is invaluable for becoming a leader. At IIT Gandhinagar, we strive to cultivate thought leaders who are empathetic, ethically aware, and capable of interdisciplinary innovation. By challenging students to engage with philosophical ideas, we aim to equip them with the critical thinking, ethical reflection, and intellectual versatility necessary for success in both their professional and personal lives. This holistic approach to education prepares students not only to excel in their technical fields but also to contribute meaningfully to society as thoughtful and informed leaders.

Teaching philosophy to engineering students at IIT Gandhinagar has been a transformative experience, both for myself and my students. Overcoming the initial challenges of engaging students with minimal exposure to liberal arts requires innovative teaching methods, contextualized content, and fostering an environment of critical thinking and debate. By bridging disciplinary divides and promoting interdisciplinary engagement, we can create a more holistic and enriching educational experience. This approach not only enhances students' philosophical understanding but also equips them with the critical thinking and problem-solving skills essential for addressing the complex challenges of the modern world. The goal is to cultivate open-minded individuals who can think deeply about complex issues and consider multiple perspectives. Teaching philosophy to engineering students requires innovative approaches that challenge their existing beliefs and encourage them to engage with alternative viewpoints. This approach not only enhances their philosophical knowledge but also equips them with valuable skills for navigating and contributing to a complex and interconnected world.

# Reflections on ICAS 13



## Bridging Leiden and Surabaya

Adrian Perkasa

My journey with ICAS started at its 10th edition in Chiang Mai, Thailand. At that time, I was lucky enough to get there through the Southeast Asia Neighborhoods Network (SEANNET), another initiative from the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS). As a participant, I got a lot more than I expected. It was such a huge event and engaging experience, one which allowed me to meet many new colleagues (and respected scholars in my field) and which set the bar for how a conference should be organized.

The library has an extensive and varied collection. After about six years, I seized the chance to join the organizing team for the ICAS 13, which took place in Surabaya, Indonesia. I believe it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create ICAS in a place where I have a lot of connections and many things to share. Furthermore, we envisioned ICAS 13 as a pioneering Conference-Festival, fostering numerous experiments, increasing

collaborations, and providing diverse opportunities for knowledge production and dissemination, both within and beyond the campus' walls in Surabaya.

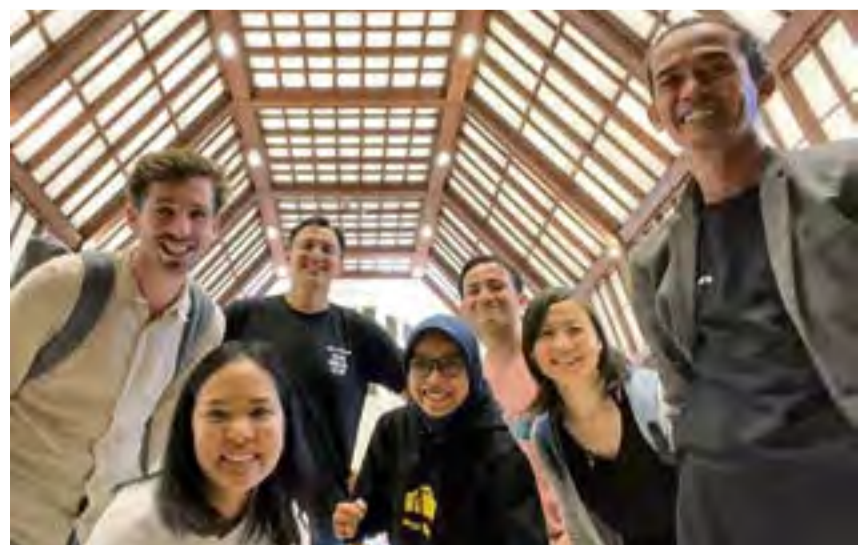
Ultimately, all of these events occurred both during and prior to ICAS. As you can see from our team's testimony, a new research collaboration was established between one of the ICAS Book Prize editions and a local researcher who was also part of the organization team. In terms of experimentation, we received numerous proposals containing innovative ideas, including exhibitions, workshops, and even sketch walks, which we endeavored to implement to the best of our ability. Although ICAS officially ended after five days, there were still things happening in Surabaya and its surrounding region, where the participants tried to explore more activities together with the local scholars, artists, and activists that they met during the ConFest.

To conclude my story, I had the honor of participating as part of the organizing team for ICAS 13. I experienced the joy of unexpected encounters from the preparation phase to the very end of this event. I was grateful to meet my old friends and new colleagues and to connect all of my networks through ICAS. It was beyond my wildest expectations that I closed the busiest week of this year by visiting a local shrine, located just behind our hotel in Surabaya, alongside my friends from Surabaya and those from the Netherlands.

Fig. 1 (above): ICAS 13 Opening Ceremony, 2024.

Fig. 2 (right): Some members of the ICAS 13 team: (from left to right) Adrian Perkasa, Wai Cheung, Narutai Riangkuar, Redo Nomadore, Alexei Wahyudiputra, Erik Jansen. (Photo courtesy of Lina Puryanti, 2024)

Fig. 3 (below): Members of the ICAS organizing team, 2024.



## Crossways of Knowledge

Alexei Wahjudiputra

The theme of ICAS 13 was “Crossways of Knowledge,” an epistemological phrase inspired by Surabaya’s pluralities and the transdisciplinary nature of contemporary Asian Studies. The concept of “crossways” not only encapsulates the broad scope of ICAS 13 but also reflects my personal feelings about it.

My roles at ICAS 13 were primarily technical and administrative. In this capacity, I worked closely with the ICAS team from IIAS. This transnational collaboration, often conducted through virtual means, revealed certain communication challenges. The 5- to 6-hour time difference between the Leiden and Surabaya teams resulted in varying energy levels during our meetings. One team’s dawn was another team’s dusk. It was challenging to synchronize our energy, but we strived to meet with the same level of vigor. In the many meetings we held every Thursday,

we prepared for every minute technical detail necessary to bring ICAS 13 concepts to life and pondered any bureaucratic challenges facing us.

Surely, we also exchanged personal stories and jokes – though these often ended with awkward grimaces, perhaps due to cultural differences or simply because they weren’t funny (I’ll never know...). These cultural differences grew larger as we and all ICAS 13 participants came to Surabaya. ICAS 13 became a site where many cultural antitheses and coalescences – however small they were – took place. Poetically, this pluralism was set against the backdrop of one of the most multicultural cities in Indonesia.

The multitude of tasks in our hands mirrored Surabaya’s bustling atmosphere, giving a prolepsis that we were already experiencing the city before we all even gathered there. Despite acknowledging its imperfections, it was nothing short of a miracle that ICAS 13 came to life in true ConFest style, spread across multiple sites in Surabaya and involving multiple societal and governmental layers. ICAS unearthed many hidden potentials in Surabaya, creating new paths – and crossways – for future activities, future histories, and emotional connections to emerge. It’s an exciting future for Surabaya, and hopefully for the collegiality of the ICAS team beyond the context of this event.



Fig. 4 (above): Roundtable participants at ICAS 13, 2024.

## Building a Conference-Festival (ConFest) Model

Wai Cheung

Spring 2023 marked the start of ICAS 13 for me, when we found our solid partner, Airlangga Institute of Indian Ocean Crossroads (AIIOC), to jump into this ICAS adventure with us. The shaping of ICAS 13 happened in the months that followed, in which we together decided to host a full in-person, locally-relevant conference that would not be bound by disciplines and regions. For the first time, ICAS proposals were not categorized by academic discipline but rather into broad overarching themes that were designed to create opportunities for transdisciplinary conversations. Alongside the more academic part, we envisioned a festival to complement the conference at which knowledge could be shared outside the conventional academic setting. With these ideas in mind, we continued to prepare for a Conference-Festival (ConFest) that would grow beyond academic

boundaries by reaching out to other communities in society and celebrating the diverse types of knowledge creation.

After a lot of planning and discussion about how the festival part of the ConFest should take shape, we decided to expand our proposal format types, adding the proposal formats ‘Activity/Workshop’ and ‘Exhibition’ to be an essential part of the festival. For these new aspects, I was more involved in preparing for the activities and workshops. Though I did not have the chance to visit any of the workshops, unfortunately, the positive feedback I got from both contributors and participants was such an encouragement. Learning how scholars, artists, and practitioners from abroad collaborated with a local counterpart to share and create knowledge together was the best result I could wish for.

On a personal level, I was glad that we could meet our participants in person again. I almost forgot how extremely rewarding it is to see the wonderful smiling faces of our participants enjoying the content that we worked hard to put together for them. Finally, I am incredibly grateful for all the amazing teams I have worked with that made ICAS 13 possible. It is not every day that I meet colleagues, both at AIIOC and IIAS, so committed and hardworking. From working jointly on screen for months to preparing the last details together at each other’s side, we shared many joyful and funny moments. This is an ICAS that I will remember for the partnerships and friendships that have flourished from it.



Fig. 5 (above): Setting up signposts at ICAS 13, 2024.



Fig. 6 (left): Visitors at the IIAS booth at ICAS 13, 2024.

## Making Space for Collaboration

Abdika Amrullah

As the largest and most intense event I've ever been involved in, ICAS 13 undeniably became the center of my world for months. With over 1500 participants from more than 60 countries, the scale of the event was staggering. It required immense preparation, long hours, and relentless teamwork. At one point, I set aside personal matters, focusing solely on the continuous cycle of work and rest. Yet, every effort was worthwhile, as the event proved to be both professionally and personally rewarding.

One of the most memorable parts of my experience was being the local coordinator for the ICAS 13 book fair. I've always loved books, but this was on a whole new level. I went from being a reader to working with editors and publishers whose work I had long admired. Coordinating the fair wasn't just about logistics; it was about creating a space for the exchange of ideas and knowledge. Facilitating connections between editors,



Fig. 1 (left): Presentation at ICAS 13.

publishers, authors, and readers was an honor and a deeply rewarding opportunity.

Beyond the book fair, ICAS 13 itself was a wellspring of enriched stories and perspectives. I forged meaningful connections with new colleagues, and one of the most treasured aspects of the

experience was the bond I built with my colleagues at IIAS. Our shared vision and dedication – and sense of humor, of course – helped us navigate the rough patches, strengthening our teamwork and ultimately forging bonds that not only contributed to the event's success but also deepened our

mutual understanding and solidified our friendships.

ICAS 13 was more than just an event – it was a dynamic convergence of minds, cultures, and stories that reshaped how I view collaboration in academia and beyond.

## Making ICAS 13 a Reality

Erik Jansen

Wow! What a wonderful adventure that was! Organizing ICAS 13 has been one of the most exciting rides of my working life. I got to work together with the best team, in Leiden and Surabaya, for which I am really thankful.

While preparing for ICAS 13, I had not met my colleagues in Surabaya in person until mid-July, two weeks before the start of the event. After only seeing them on screen for so many months, and after all

these conversations about Surabaya and the ConFest venues, my anticipation of going to Surabaya had been rising. Finally meeting them in person was fantastic, and experiencing Surabaya in real life suddenly made everything so much more tangible.

In similar fashion, after having had email contact with so many of ICAS 13's participants, meeting everyone in real life and being able to connect names to faces was great. Especially after seeing things run smoothly and seeing so many happy faces, I realized what we managed to put together over the course of the last year, and I felt really grateful and satisfied.

No doubt that Indonesian hospitality contributed immensely to being able to feel the way I felt, being surrounded by the best team, enjoying the most delicious food – it was my first visit to Indonesia, but definitely not my last!

Fig. 2 (right): The Kali Mas ("Golden River") running through the city of Surabaya, 2024.



Fig. 3 (above): Members of the ICAS 13 team, representing both IIAS and AIIOC/UnAir, celebrating at De Soematra, Surabaya, Indonesia.

## New Connections and Friendships at ICAS 13

Petrik Mahisa Akhtabi

2024 is definitely a standout for me. I had the amazing chance to be part of the core committee for the 13th International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) in Surabaya. Being involved in this event wasn't just about meeting new friends and colleagues – it was also an essential step in building my skills and experience. As a committee member, I worked hands-on with the coordination, from planning and organizing logistics to making sure everything ran smoothly during the sessions involving scholars around the globe (over 60 countries, can you imagine?). This really helped me to improve my communication skills across different cultures, the ability to work with various teams and enhance my management skills.

One particularly unforgettable moment was when I had the chance to meet Nicholas Prévot, a music researcher from France. During our conversation, I learned that he had won the prestigious ICAS Book Prize (IBP)

French Language Edition 2023. We delved into a fascinating discussion about music, particularly traditional Asian music, and he generously shared his broad insights on how music reflects both the social and spiritual character of nations across Asia. This exact moment not only broadened my perspective on the study of music but inspired me to explore cross-cultural music studies further, too. That kind of experience absolutely provided me with invaluable lessons, deepening my understanding of academic dynamics while connecting me with a broader network in the global academic community. ICAS 13 will remain a cornerstone in both my personal and professional journey.

After all, I couldn't be more thankful for my amazing colleagues at IIAS! Their support and teamwork made the whole experience so much more enjoyable. With their dedication, brilliant ideas, and great sense of humor, we didn't just pull off a successful event – we created a tight-knit, fun-loving friendship that I'll always treasure.

## City as Stage: Utilizing Multiple Venues for ICAS 13

Narutai Riangkruar

Since ICAS 11 ventured out and utilized Leiden's existing infrastructure and offered opportunities for the participants to get acquainted with the locality and its people, "local embedment" has become one of ICAS' key principles. At ICAS 13, we embarked on the journey to accentuate multiple facets of Surabaya by hosting exhibitions, workshops, book talks, and discussion sessions at various locations outside Universitas Airlangga (UNAIR).

Surabaya's vibrancy was represented architecturally by historical monuments such as De Javasche Bank, Balai Pemuda, and Museum Pendidikan. The Han Ancestral House showed the intertwined history of the Peranakan Chinese and Javanese. Kampung Baru, Streng Kali Jagir, Peneleh, Plampitan, and Tambak Bayan constituted the arts of local and human-scale living amidst this ever-bustling and larger-than-life city.

Providing such a diverse range of experiences was undeniably a strenuous effort. We quickly realized logistics and transportation would be more complex than in European cities. However, we were

not alone in this, as the collaboration with local partners was instrumental in the success of ICAS 13. Ibu Lisa Wahyuningtyasti and her Universitas Airlangga Transportation Department team worked closely with us to map out the shuttle routes and schedules, mobilizing participants between UNAIR campuses, hotels, and all festival locations. The Surabaya City Council also played a crucial role in sponsoring transportation and venue access.

All in all, ICAS 13 was an ICAS extraordinary. How did we pull that off? How did we offer the bite-size experience of Surabaya? It would not have succeeded without contributions of ICAS 13 participants, partner institutions, local collaborators and coordinators, Surabaya city and its people, UNAIR colleagues, AIIOC team, and everyone at IIAS. Thank you!

Fig. 4 (left): ICAS 13 Conference-Festival Map. Illustrated by Redo Nomadore (Surabaya). Excerpt of ICAS 13 Programme Book, page 15.

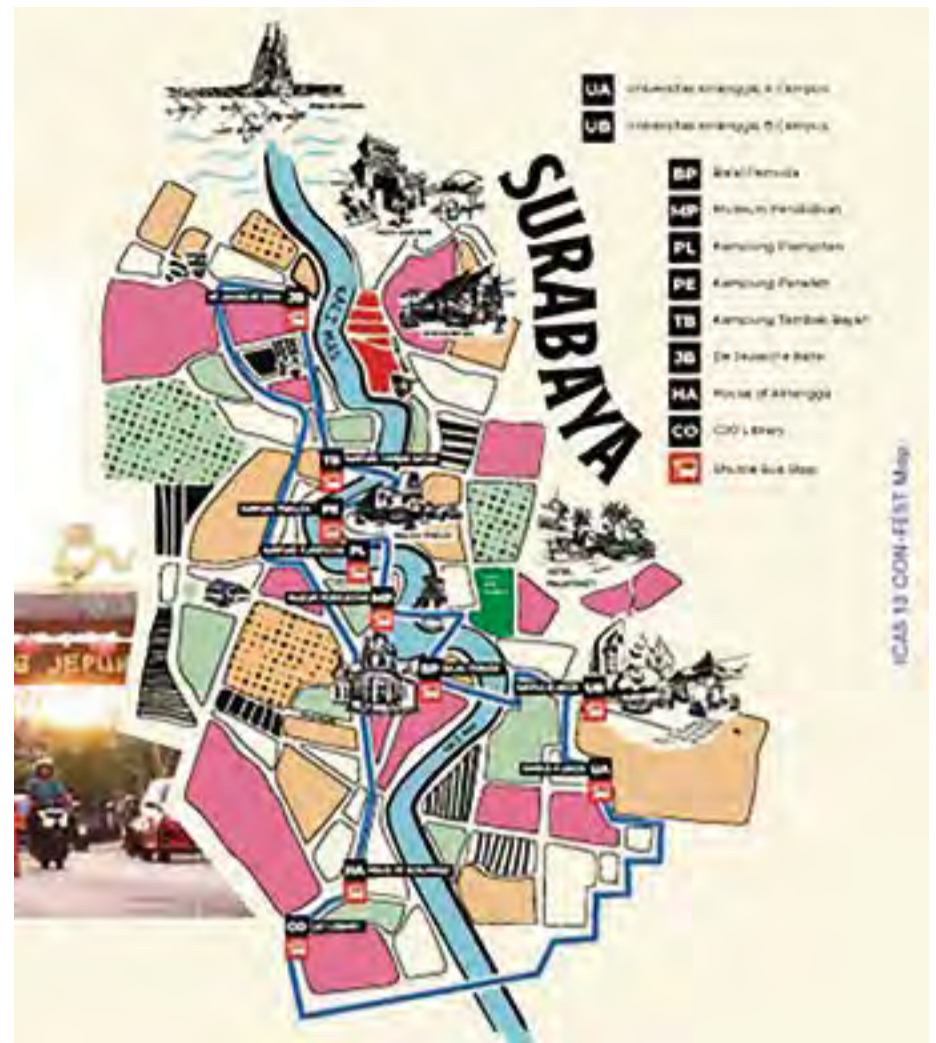


Fig. 5 (above): Participants enjoying lunch on the campus of Universitas Airlangga during ICAS 13.

# New Faces, Shared Spaces

## ICAS 13 Volunteers

Muhammad Fuad Izzatulfikri

Working with a small, familiar team is certainly more desirable. But what if we're paired with names we've never known, faces we've never seen, and have no clue how we'll work together in between? Here's a little story about my experience as the volunteer coordinator for ICAS 13.



One month before, I met the committee and they just gave me a short briefing and some volunteer data. Since I had not met them personally, I needed to explore the data and discuss it with my teammate. It gave me a big challenge, ensuring the ideal number of volunteers for every section is a big deal. But I had great optimism for this event.

The day that the event started, I was a little bit worried, until a notification hit my

phone: So far, this has been my favorite committee, someone shared with me in a message, quietly. Perhaps it's due to a Main Committee that's so committed, joyful, and passionate. Many things were done wholeheartedly, with smiles and sincerity. That was where all my big optimism came from.

For me, volunteering isn't just about filling time or seeking distraction. At the very least, I learn about myself, about others, and about the world's interaction.

It's not merely about what is allowed or what is not, but understanding "the why" of something. Serving is noble, but don't stop there – learn and grow, embrace the dare.

When their names were chosen, we accepted whatever would come. Little sparks and whispers did arise, but fostering a positive, appreciative, and cohesive vibe was the key to thriving.

Lastly, my heartfelt thanks to everyone involved in ICAS 13, especially the Inter-

national Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), AIIOC, and Universitas Airlangga. Like "The Waiting Room" in the main lobby of the Avenger Tower – the students refer to ASEEC Building Tower as "The Avenger Tower" because its design resembles the letter A on Marvel's Avengers movies – the vibrance of this event brought reflections, friendships, bittersweet moments, and glimpses of a future unknown, yet serene.

## ICAS 13 Volunteer Testimonials



"The same opportunity won't come twice." I've always held onto that quote, which keeps me taking my next step towards a new opportunity when it comes. I used to be afraid of new things, afraid about the what ifs: "What if I fail? What if I disappoint my team?" But now I realize self-doubt won't take me anywhere. So here I am, taking another step towards another opportunity ahead of me. It's truly been an honor to be a part of the ICAS 13 Volunteer Team. Despite all the obstacles, I enjoyed my whole experience here – having a great team, meeting a lot of new people with different backgrounds, and being in a very supportive environment. I've learned a lot from them. Lastly, I'm very grateful to have an experience together with ICAS, and now I can also proudly say that I have my new family, that is, ICAS Team.

Aaliyah Fidela Hartono

Volunteering as part of the conference panel team at ICAS was an incredibly rewarding experience. Over the seven days, I found myself thoroughly enjoying the behind-the-scenes work. Coordinating directly with the session chairs and ensuring that each panel session ran on time and smoothly helped me sharpen my organizational and communication skills. I'm especially proud of UNAIR and the entire volunteer team for making the event flow seamlessly.

One of the highlights of my time was the opportunity to interact with so many individuals gathered to discuss pressing issues in Asian culture. Hearing their diverse perspectives, even as a business student with a basic understanding of the topics, I was able to broaden my viewpoint. I was also excited to make small talk in Mandarin and Dutch with native speakers, two languages I've been dabbling in learning. It was a personal achievement that added to the richness of the experience.

I left with a deeper appreciation for both Asian Studies and international collaboration.

Viggo Akbar Nasafra



Yesi Rahma Mustika, a Political Science student at Airlangga University, volunteered at the 13th International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) from July 28 to August 1, 2024. Assigned to the registration division, I worked with students from different faculties, forming strong bonds and learning the importance of teamwork. It was my first time interacting with participants from various countries, and although I struggled with different accents and cultural nuances, it helped me improve my English and communication skills.

The event offered rich experiences, from attending academic sessions and book fairs to cultural exhibitions, which broadened my understanding of global knowledge and heritage. Observing friendships form and ideas exchanged among participants was inspiring.

This transformative experience boosted my confidence in cross-cultural communication and event management, showing me the value of collaboration across borders. It has prepared me for future challenges and inspired me to seek similar opportunities.

Yesi Rahma Mustika



When I reflect on my experience at the ICAS 13 Conference, the memories are as vivid as the colors of Surabaya's bustling streets. ICAS 13, the International Convention of Asia Scholars, is a gathering that attracts scholars, experts, and enthusiasts from across the globe. When I was assigned the role of liaison officer for buses, I knew that I had a responsibility to present Surabaya as a whole. My role required me to navigate both the logistical and cultural aspects of the conference. Coordinating buses for hundreds of attendees was no small feat. The pressure was palpable, but so was the excitement. But the true essence of my duties lay in the participant's happiness. Showing off Surabaya was not just about pointing out landmarks; it was about weaving a narrative.

The ICAS 13 Conference was a personal journey of rediscovery. It reinforced my love for Surabaya and highlighted the importance of sharing our unique stories with the world. It was more than just an event; it was a celebration of unity in diversity, and I was privileged to be a part of it.

Cysakaren Diva Pratiwi

I gained so many valuable experiences. One of the highlights was meeting two new friends while we were on duty at film screenings. It was just the three of us. That time together really bonded us, and it was nice to feel like we were forming a meaningful connection.

Throughout ICAS, I was able to apply what I had learned in my two semesters at college directly to real-life situations. For example, when a foreign visitor wanted to buy food or drinks at the local food stall, I stepped in as a translator. Another time, I acted as a spontaneous tour guide. One moment that stands out was when I lent money to a professor from Mexico because she couldn't pay using QRIS. She later returned the money and gave me more than I had lent her, but I regretted not asking for her business card as a keepsake.

Volunteering at ICAS also gave me a glimpse into what my future career might look like as an English major. It made me start rethinking and reshaping my dreams, and this experience has been a stepping stone in shaping my future and aspirations.

Nurun Zahrah

ICAS13 was indeed an event that was out of my comfort zone. It was also my first time joining an event in another campus of Universitas Airlangga. As someone who is a part of many committees, I usually join the design team, but this time, I became the head of the consumption and health team. At first it was a rough start, with me being new to the job and with the unclear details from the higher ups. It became smoother as the days passed and I got to interact with students from other majors. Frankly, my experience could be a bit boring compared to others, but one experience I can say is pretty unique was when I was called to the hospital to check on a sick participant on the first day. To be honest, it was quite exciting, as I wanted to put my English-speaking abilities into action and there I was, being a translator for a participant and the hospital staff. During my time looking after the participant, I had a good small talk with his

friend about our interests and I shared a few things about Indonesia, mainly regarding the health sector. As much as the friend insisted that I could leave since I had confirmed their presence at the hospital, I couldn't, as I knew I had this responsibility to make sure the sick participant was well enough if he were to be discharged. At that moment, I could say the medical student in me came to life, as my only thinking was that the patient's wellbeing comes first, despite the circumstances I was in. It was getting late and my phone was almost out of battery, but as I stayed longer, the more I realized that there might have been miscommunications because of the language barrier. At the end of the day, everything went smoothly. I could really say this was a unique experience and I would definitely go through it again and hopefully as a participant next time.

Ni Putu Sevina Lovyanti



ICAS 2024 was an extremely astonishing experience for me. I am Aurellia, the girl who didn't expect anything, arrived at the ASEC Tower for the last day of ICAS 2024, thinking it would be just another typical event. She was ready to assist with any technicalities just like days before, but nothing beyond that. However, before she walked in, things took a sharp turn. She was asked to step up as the coordinator for the very last day – an overwhelming responsibility, for sure.

Suddenly, the fate of over 200 participants, a lineup of prominent speakers, and intricate logistics were in her hands. She barely had time to process it. From ensuring sessions ran seamlessly to troubleshooting tech glitches, it was somehow chaotic, but she quickly stood up because she knew that she was chosen as the substitute coordinator for ASEC because of her hard work and determination. Despite the whirlwind of demands and the constant buzzing of her phone due to the coordination among the group, Aurellia rose to the challenge, ensuring the event ended successfully. What began as an ordinary day turned into a test of her strength, and she thrived, marking it as another opportunity to grow, and embrace herself.

Aurellia Saraswati

# Workshops and Film Screenings at ICAS 13



Fig. 1: Indonesian snacks offered during a kampung visit.

## Documenting the City

Ethnographic Engagements  
Beyond the Fieldnote

The workshop took place on a beautiful Sunday, 28th July, 2024, in the Kampung Plampitan. As workshop coordinator, I had the opportunity to visit the kampung the day before, which helped in setting a realistic program for the next day. The live workshop format helped us get a firsthand experience of the nuances of observation and documentation involved in fieldwork using alternative methods. After a brief introduction (by the coordinator), participants were taken on a walk around the Kampung, after which they were invited to share their findings. The workshop was attended by over 20 participants who thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

Anasua Chatterjee, RKSMVV,  
West Bengal State University

## Public Intervention

Workshop of Inflatable Sculpture  
in Public Space

Throughout the afternoon, participants from different parts of the world gathered to create an inflatable sculpture as a creative way to support a protest or cause. Not by chance, some came from countries like Myanmar, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and India, where protesting has become a sensitive issue in recent years. After the initial session, where we shared experiences, references, and the use of inflatables in demonstrations, we decided to build a giant dynamite sculpture with the words "Masih lembur?" ("Still overworking?"), addressing the long and precarious work hours faced by many Indonesian workers and scholars. It was displayed on campus and in the public square Balai Pemuda for an entire week.

Frederico Ravioli, ARCO Cooperative School  
Gabriel Ussami, University of São Paulo,  
Brazil



Fig. 3: Participants view the photo exhibition "Who Owns Durga?" at Balai Pemuda Timur.

## Public History in Indonesia

Accompanied by the rhythmic sound of drums from across the water, I presented practical examples at Museum Pendidikan, illustrating how participatory public history can help co-create more inclusive historical narratives. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their own positionality and brainstorm project ideas, including crowdsourced exhibitions, oral histories in public spaces, and co-creating urban art. The workshop sought to inspire attendees to incorporate participatory methods into their work, fostering a more diverse and inclusive representation of Indonesia's past within their respective contexts.

Joëlla van Donkersgoed,  
University of Luxembourg



Fig. 2: Interactive workshop along Surabaya's waterways hosted by the River Cities Network (RCN).

## Kampungs of Surabaya

A Singapore-Indonesia Collaborative  
Documentary Filmmaking Project

Singapore Polytechnic (SP) highly values its partnerships with both industry and universities. It was a pleasure to present the collaboration between SP's Media, Arts & Design School and Universitas Airlangga, Indonesia. Our session was met with an engaged and enthusiastic audience, and their positive, insightful feedback was incredibly encouraging. They recognised the significant effort invested in training students through real-world experiences and appreciated the pedagogical approach, which not only enhances students' technical filmmaking skills but also fosters their resilience and broader worldview.

Mary Chin, Singapore  
Polytechnic, Singapore  
Titik Puji Rahayu, Universitas  
Airlangga, Indonesia

## Between History and Myth

Sea Legends in Hong Kong's waters  
from mermaids to pirates

Knowledge production in academia is not limited to written texts and papers. At ICAS 13, we presented our ongoing artistic research on inter-Asian diasporic Chinese migration histories as a lecture performance and exhibition, using the mediums of storytelling, contemporary dance, and video art. Under the Oceanic Crossroads theme, Surabaya was the perfect location for us to present our performance series! Appealing to the affective and the imaginative opens up new avenues for knowledge exchange, and we had a great time sharing our working method and philosophy with a very engaged audience. We look forward to seeing more artistic collaborations, where research meets embodied expressions, in future conference-festivals!

Evelyn Wan, Utrecht University,  
the Netherlands  
Alysa Leung, Independent Artist, Hong Kong  
Anson Sham, Independent Filmmaker,  
Hong Kong





Fig. 4: Group photo of excursion and workshop hosted by the River Cities Network (RCN).

## Nickel Unearthed

The Human and Climate Costs of Indonesia's Nickel Industry

A short film and photo-essay advocating for the communities impacted by nickel mining expansion in Halmahera were presented by Adlun Fiqri, an activist, photographer, and spokesperson for the SaveSagea movement. The discussion was moderated by student members of Amnesty UNAIR, with scholars working on the topic of extractive industries and environmental justice – Jiahui Zeng and Danishwara Nathaniel – as discussants. Adlun, hailing from Sagea in North Maluku – one of the villages deeply affected by the industrialization of Halmahera's coastlines – expressed his appreciation for the effort to include non-academics, civil society, and activists in an international academic forum, recognizing the importance of addressing urgent climate (in)justice issues, while amplifying the voices of those bearing the heaviest burden. Please check out our Instagram account for the highlights of our events: <https://www.instagram.com/imageaproject>

Danishwara Nathaniel, Geneva Graduate Institute  
 Adlun Fiqri, Fakawele & SaveSagea, Indonesia  
 Anitha Silvia, C2O Library & Collabative, Indonesia  
 Jiahui Zeng, Tsinghua University, China

## Furnishing Cultural Heritage

Visual Storytelling with Pen and Ink

At the ICAS 13 Conference-Festival 2024 in Surabaya, Indonesia, participants engaged in an on-site workshop titled "Furnishing Cultural Heritage: Visual Storytelling with Pen and Ink" at Bungkul Park, a historic and urban activity hub. The session encouraged participants to photograph and sketch natural surroundings, slowing time in observation and reflection. Attendees practiced sketching while experiencing tension between the modernization and preservation of a cultural heritage site. Our activity blended social, cultural, and environmental themes, in an expanded interdisciplinary dialogue and artistic expression. The park, recognized for its protected green space, provided the perfect backdrop for this open creative exchange.

Thea Mercer, Independent Researcher, Ireland



Fig. 5: Spices and artworks on display at ICAS 13.

## Water Champions in River Revitalization

Catalysts for Crafting a Sustainable, Resilient Blueprint of Heritage Cities in Indonesia

Komunitas Lanskap Budaya (KALBU) and IDN Liveable Cities are thrilled to have hosted the Water Champions game not once, but twice! Our first session energized conference participants, including members of the River Cities Network, while the second ignited the creativity of students of Narotama University, Surabaya. Remarkably, the students showcased exceptional resourcefulness in tackling the game's challenges. This experience fills us with hope that these future young leaders will spearhead river revitalization efforts, uniting communities and stakeholders alike. Together, we can forge sustainable, resilient cities that honor and protect our vital water resources! Many thanks to the amazing ICAS 13 organizers.

Wiwi Tjook, IDN Liveable Cities  
 Dani Myrwati Soedjalmo, KALBU (Indonesia Cultural Landscape Community), Indonesia  
 Yuni Prihayati, KALBU, Indonesia  
 Euis Puspita, KALBU, Indonesia  
 Arief Rahman, Institute Pertanian Bogor, Indonesia

## Urban Sketchwalk

Tracing the Spice Route in Surabaya

We began with the Sketchwalk on a vibrant Sunday morning (July 28th) as participants of ICAS 13 were arriving. With sketchbooks in hand and drawing tools tucked close, the group wandered through the city as it gently woke up to the bright sunlight. The sketchers captured scenes of the market awakening for its regulars, the graceful forms of old architecture, the city's landmarks, and the rhythms of daily life as its dwellers move through their day. The workshop is the result of a collaborative session between Urban Sketchers Surabaya (USK) and Fadriah Syuaib, an artist from Ternate, North Maluku, who both employed similar methods of knowing one's urban environment through the act of sketching. From the discussions they have had, they both agreed that sketching as a practice can be a great educational tool for observation, noticing, and representation of a social world, particularly for young participants getting acquainted with visual arts at an earlier stage of their education.



Fig. 6: Participants viewing textiles from Kiribati, exhibited in the basement of Balai Pemuda.



Fig. 7: A view of Dupak Magersari, a kampung built adjacent to one of Surabaya's railways.

## Grounding Soils in Southeast Asia

A Workshop for Soil Scientists, Artists, Practitioners, Activists, and Interdisciplinary Researchers

The "Grounding Soils" workshop brought together over 20 early-career soil and interdisciplinary scholars, artists, and activists in the ICAS framework to share contexts, practices and knowledges on soils in Southeast and East Asia. We co-produced the workshop with our collaborators to respond to the following questions:

- 1) What is the potency of the cultural work that activists and artists carry out in creating new cultural forces to actualize ecological relations between people and their homes?
- 2) What forms of exploitation may arise as soil becomes a commodity, which manifests as existential threats by those connected to the most vulnerable? How does this tension erode knowledge of soil into the formation of land according to the logic of privatization and expropriation? The responses were grounded in multimodal activities.

Dimas D. Laksmna, Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia  
 Huijing Ng, Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, Ludwig-Maximilians University, Germany  
 Ismal Muntaha, Badan Kajian Tanah, Indonesia  
 Markus Wernli, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong  
 Joshua Ezekiel Sales, Food Today Food Tomorrow, Philippines

Similarly, the urban heritage walk involved Surabaya heritage enthusiasts and communities named Oud Soerabaja Hunter (OSH). Participants were guided through the Surabaya Old Town area, where we also got the chance to enter some historic colonial buildings and learned firsthand, on-site what certain artifacts and symbols signify in their original state. Such practices form the basis of enlivening Urban Heritage Landscape, whereby communities can participate in making and learning about the historical dynamics of their own city and its development.

Please consult our Instagram (@imageaproject), where we use the platform to document, exhibit, and interact with the work of our interlocutors, including those from this programme.

Danishwara Nathaniel, Geneva Graduate Institute  
 Fadriah Syuaib, Ternate, Indonesia  
 Anitha Silvia, C2O Library & Collabative, Indonesia



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Fig. 1: Lantern-making workshop at Tambak Bayan Big Hall, ICAS 13, Surabaya, Indonesia. (Photo by Rita Padawangi, 2024)

# Resilience as Heritage

Michael Herzfeld and Rita Padawangi

**Local societies in Asia have long been known for their persistence in the face of an all-devouring developmentalism. They have championed their own traditions – sometimes in the name of heritage, more often not – and have seen in these a way of resisting the forces that threaten to uproot them and destroy their lives, values, and everyday practices. They have doubled down on the insistence that they, not the bureaucrats and politicians, represent the true culture of the place where they live.**

In this volume, an eclectic agglomeration of case histories, we have collectively explored the idea that, in the Asian context at least, resilience has itself become an important form of heritage. It is perhaps one of the most intangible-seeming of heritages, but the reality is that its effects have often proved remarkably tangible. While the forms of resistance to authority this resilience has fed have frequently ended in failure, the afterglow of pride and dignity may fuel more imitations, more refusals of bureaucratic insensitivity and corporate greed, more demands of recognition for the diverse modernities that challenge the hegemony of the nation-state and rampant consumerism. It has become important to see resilience itself as a form of heritage.

If resistance becomes a watchword for revolutionary societies, resilience may instead signal a degree of conservatism – but not the conservatism of the corporate state. Resilience is about human dignity, which involves human agency in making decisions and choices. Resilience is not merely about keeping a roof over one's head, but about being able to choose the design of that roof, to maintain a physical and cultural framework that gives familiarity and meaning to everyday life while also allowing opportunities to explore new ways. So while resilience may entail conservatism, this is also not the conservatism that refuses all forms of innovation. Indeed, true resilience entails innovation that nevertheless respects the styles and needs that rest on past experience.

Allied to the concept of resilience is that of community. We recognize that community is a very generic term that, for that reason, has been widely criticized as vague. Yet it is also true that groups of people find in their shared sociality – as well as in forms of artistic production that defy larger conventions – a sense of a specific identity tied to a place, a practice, or a worldview. In this generic sense, community stands in for those forms of belonging that rest on the right to do things together, and, simply, to be together.

We recognize that this sense of community is not peculiarly Asian. Indeed, it is important to transcend stereotypical and essentializing distinctions between Asian and “Western” societies. Our concern is not with “Asian resilience” but with “resilience in Asia” – and specifically in the easterly reaches of the continent, where the uneven interplay of colonialism and global capitalism with an astonishing variety of ways of achieving community offers an especially fertile context for thinking about what constitutes resilience and vernacularity.

In these pages, Steve Ferzacca in particular also debunks the tangible-intangible distinction, arguing that heritage is above all a social construction that arises from the intersection of various layers of identity formation – including, but not privileging, that of the nation-state (which in the case of Singapore entails a nation of multiple ethnicities temporarily, arbitrarily, joyously dissolved in a salad that in its very heterogeneity serves as a model of the resilient disorder that people recognize as both vernacular and heritage). The mini-*Bildungsroman* that Ferzacca narrates – how a visiting anthropologist from Canada finds the common cultural and musical threads that lead him to participate in a durable activity that is at once social, cultural, sensory, and aesthetic – alerts us to those moments of clarity in which it is the act of recognition that constitutes heritage and strengthens its potentiality just to be, to exist, at the happy confluence of overlapping personal, cultural, and social trajectories.

Resilience is everywhere. Sometimes it opposes authority; at others, it takes the form of an equally creative obedience. Sometimes it arrests visual appearance through acts of reasserting a collective tradition in the face of official disdain or of appropriating official versions of heritage for local consumption. Sometimes it is a refusal to fit into new, bureaucratic forms or official identity politics aimed at consolidating state power. It is about adaptation, collective self-recognition, recognition by others. Sometimes it is starkly conservative, at others innovative and riotously flexible. Recognition is, perhaps, the key to those moments when something comes tangibly into focus and then demonstrates an unexpected capacity to resist the anonymizing and leveling effects of time.

Resilience is about what people do together, whether as an *ad hoc* jamming group, an equally *ad hoc* agglomeration of families from different points of origin (as in Pom Mahakan, Bangkok), or the cultural cosmopolitanism that opposes that of the nationalistic state and proves an enduring source of local solidarity (as in Melaka, discussed in the accounts of

both Kim Helmersen and Pierpaolo De Giosa). The act of doing something together can take the form of tactical cooperation between several households to face a common threat, as we see in Marie Gilbert-Flutre's observation of residents' efforts to increase resilience to floods in Ho Chi Minh City. Or again it can emerge in an organized effort of several communities to preserve collective memory through events and new rituals in the midst of an industry-driven environmental disaster such as that observed by Anton Novenanto and I Wayan Sugadnya in Porong, Indonesia.

Often, as Tessa Guazon shows, it emerges in works of art that, in the face of natural disasters, depart from official representations of the smiling nation and instead assert – the performative act of assertion should be a key term in any consideration of resilience

– more localized forms of identity that resist the homogenizing effects of official discourse; these also transcend the self-other splits that so often result from ethnic and national politics and thereby produce new forms of reciprocity. Works of art, also the focus of Motohiro Koizumi's writing on site-specific and socially engaged art, may become avenues to encourage community participation, allowing individuals to express themselves through a collective art project. If Helmersen's analysis invokes Émile Durkheim, Guazon's seems – reciprocally? – to conjure up the ghost of Marcel Mauss.

Performative and collective acts of assertion as resilience constitute a key theme shared across all chapters and the book cover. Not taken from any of the chapters in the book, the cover photo represents a form of resilience as a collective effort: a community hall and various artworks at Tambak Bayan, a neighborhood in Surabaya, Indonesia, that is at some risk of eviction after a long land dispute. The community has developed networks with academics and artists, local and international (including hosting events and visits during the ICAS 13 ConFest in 2024, Fig. 1). It is an assertion of the residents' collective existence in the neighborhood space.

These perspectives reinforce the sense that resilience itself can appear as a form of heritage. Herein perhaps lies a danger, that of essentializing resilience as a peculiarly local (or national, or Asian) property. Instead, in rejecting the idea of a homogeneous “Asian resilience,” we prefer to treat resilience as a heritage of *humanity*. That, perhaps, offers the best reason for the deliberate eclecticism of our volume – an eclecticism that is itself an act of resistance and resilience in the face of the normative expectations of academic publication. We wanted to do something different; and here it is.

Michael Herzfeld holds Emeritus positions at Harvard and Leiden Universities. His twelve books include *Siege of the Spirits: Community and Polity in Bangkok* (2016) and *Subversive Archaisms: Troubling Traditionalists and the Politics of National Heritage* (2021). His current research addresses heritage politics, crypto-colonialism, and artisans' practices of competition and cooperation.

Rita Padawangi is Associate Professor (Sociology) at Singapore University of Social Sciences. Her research is on social movements, community engagement, and environmental justice. Rita coordinates the Southeast Asia Neighbourhoods Network (SEANNET), a collaborative urban research and education initiative. She recently published *Urban Development in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

## Resilience as Heritage in Asia

Michael Herzfeld, Rita Padawangi (eds.)

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The eBook PDF will be Open Access.

This volume analyzes forms of collective resilience through manifestations of strength-in-fragility in selected communities in Asia (Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand). Persistent resistance to communal erasure taking place through repressive policies and commercialized, multinational urban development insensitive to local communities and values often presents an uphill battle. Some of these collective efforts to survive through everyday actions, encounters, and constant struggles

have successful outcomes, while others are ephemeral at best. The authors argue that persisting vernacular spaces located between resistance and co-optation are themselves a form of local cultural heritage in the rapidly urbanizing region. Recognizing these nonconformist forms of resilience as heritage acknowledges the creativity involved in challenging social and political inequalities. Supporting the cultural autonomy of local communities by acknowledging resilience as heritage contributes to social justice in the region.





## News from the IIAS Fellowship Programme

Laura Erber

The academic year has commenced at the IIAS Fellowship Programme with the arrival of our new cohort, a notable group of eight scholars embarking on a 12-month fellowship to advance their research and projects with us. This diverse group brings expertise in film studies and communication, architecture, archaeology, gender studies, social anthropology, and geography. They approach their research with a global perspective on Asia, enriched by a profound understanding of local contexts. We wish them all a fruitful and inspiring stay in Leiden.

We are excited to welcome Professor Tze-Lan Sang as the new Chair of Taiwan Studies for the next five months. Professor Sang's research delves into women's documentary films from Taiwan, examining how female directors address ethnic, national, and migration issues within Taiwan's cinematic tradition. She will also work on translating poetry by Taiwanese poet Hsi Muren. We are also hosting Makoto Yoshida, from Nanzan University in Japan, who will be spending his sabbatical with us. Dr. Yoshida will

deepen his research on the Dutch colonial passport system and its role in controlling the movement of Chinese people from the Netherlands East Indies. His work will involve collecting and analysing records from Dutch Ministries and Consulates in various Chinese cities to explore the peculiarities of colonial passports and their function as official identity documents for Chinese individuals. And our current Gonda Fellow, Sandra Sattler, will be at IIAS developing her research on the role of Kālañjara (Kalinjar), a historic hill fort in

India, in the worship of a fierce goddess from the 9th to 13th centuries.

### New partnerships

We are very pleased to announce new partnerships with three esteemed institutions: the International Institute of Social History and Framer Framed, both based in Amsterdam, and the CAPAS - Käte Hamburger Center for Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Studies, affiliated with Heidelberg University.

The International Institute of Social History (*Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis* [IISG]), founded in Amsterdam in 1935, is a premier institution for uncovering and understanding the forces that have shaped our world. Located in the heart of Amsterdam, the IISG is renowned for its extensive collections and groundbreaking research. Its mission is to preserve and promote historical documents and artefacts illuminating the pivotal social and political movements that have transformed societies.

The institute holds a remarkable collection of documentation focusing on liberation movements in Asia, Latin America, and Southern Africa. Among the highlights are a draft page of the Communist Manifesto and an extensive array of banners and artefacts created in the context of the Umbrella Movement protests in Hong Kong. This crucial repository offers deep insights into the fight for freedom and justice in these regions, underscoring the IISG's role in preserving and sharing these vital historical narratives.

Framer Framed functions as a pioneering platform for contemporary art, visual culture, critical theory, and an array of socially engaged artistic practices. Annually, their team curates a diverse range of exhibitions and hosts various cultural and educational events at its primary venue in Amsterdam Oost, as well as at its project space, Werkplaats Molenwijk, in Amsterdam Noord. Committed to the idea that impactful and contextually aware programming thrives in an open and accessible environment, Framer Framed offers all of its public programmes free of charge. The organisation provides resources to both emerging and established local and international artists, curators, and communities, supporting them in transforming their creative visions into reality. Visitors are regarded as collaborators and are afforded the time, support, and facilities necessary to bring their ideas to life.

The Käte Hamburger Center for Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Studies (CAPAS) at Heidelberg University is a pioneering research institute dedicated to exploring the impact of catastrophes and apocalyptic scenarios on societies, imaginaries, and environments. Employing a transdisciplinary approach, CAPAS investigates both historical and contemporary disruptions, aiming to differentiate and understand these upheavals. The centre delves into reactions to end-time visions and future planning in the context of their historical and cultural settings. CAPAS integrates empirical research with interpretive humanistic approaches to fully understand and analyse apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic concepts. While natural and social sciences provide empirical observations, the humanities offer insights into cultural framings and future scenarios that go beyond mere predictions. Given the global and transcultural nature of end-time scenarios, CAPAS leverages international expertise by appointing global fellows and collaborating with leading research centres and universities worldwide.

The IIAS Fellowship Programme and its partner institutes will organise activities and events designed to integrate our fellows into a complex and enriching academic and para-academic landscape, fostering diverse forms of knowledge sharing and innovative formats for high-quality contemporary debate. Stay tuned for more updates on the developments within our programme and about our fellows.

Laura Erber is Coordinator Global Partnerships and Fellowships at IIAS. Email: [l.rabelo.erber@iias.nl](mailto:l.rabelo.erber@iias.nl)

## New Fellows at IIAS



**My Hang Thi Bui**  
 Research Fellow  
 Cluster: Asian Cities  
 Project: *The Twinning of the East: South Korea-Vietnam Sister Cities*



**Ling Zhang**  
 Research Fellow  
 Cluster: Global Asia  
 Project: *Sounding Wayward Journeys: Traveling Film and Media in China and the World, 1949-1989*



**Zhengfeng Wang**  
 Research Fellow  
 Cluster: Asian Cities, Global Asia  
 Project: *Building Freshness: Refrigerated Space for Foodway and Techno-politics in Treaty-Port China*



**Pablo Ampuero Ruiz**  
 Research Fellow  
 Cluster: Global Asia  
 Project: *Enacting Green Finance: Meanings of Greenness and Imaginaries of Sustainable Development through China's Investments in Latin America*



**Meera Venkatachalam**  
 Research Fellow  
 Cluster: Asian Cities, Global Asia  
 Project: *Africans and the Making of Postcolonial Mumbai: Traders, Missionaries, and Cultural Brokers (1950s-onwards)*



**Sarah Niazi**  
 Research Fellow  
 Cluster: Global Asia  
 Project: *Pedagogy and Practice: Teaching and Making Films in India (1930- 1950)*



**Sandra Sattler**  
 Research Fellow (Gonda Fellow)  
 Cluster: Global Asia  
 Project: *Fierce Devotion: The Significance of the Goddess in Kālañjara's Sacred Landscape*



**Ming Luo**  
 Research Fellow  
 Cluster: Global Asia  
 Project: *Contours of Activism: LBT Women in Beijing, 1980s-2010s*



**Makoto Yoshida**  
 Visiting Researcher  
 Cluster: Global Asia  
 Project: *Institutionalising the Colonial Passport the Netherlands East Indies*



**Xiaomei Zhao**  
 Research Fellow  
 Cluster: Asian Heritages  
 Project: *Negotiating History from Below: A Cultural Heritage of Contesting Ethnicity through Houses in Minority Southwest China since the Eighteenth Century*



**Tze-Lan Sang**  
 Professorial Fellow  
 Chair of Taiwan Studies at Leiden University and IIAS  
 Cluster: Global Asia  
 Project: *Women's Documentaries from Taiwan*

# IIAS Fellowship Options

Would you like to join the IIAS researchers' community? Apply for one of our fellowship modalities:

### IIAS Fellowship for Post-Doctoral Researchers

We invite preferably young or mid-career researchers in the Social Sciences and Humanities, to apply for a 12-month fellowship



### Combine your IIAS fellowship with a short-term research experience at FMSH in Paris

When applying for an IIAS Fellowship, you have the option of simultaneously applying for an additional one to three months of residency at the Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme (FMSH) in Paris, France.



### Gonda-IIAS Fellowship

Promising young Indologists at the post-doctorate level can apply for funding with the J. Gonda Foundation of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) to spend three to six months doing research at IIAS.



### IIAS Collaborative Fellowship

This short-term residential fellowship is designed to embrace a broad spectrum of researchers and practitioners, encompassing not only academics but also artists, curators, librarians and editors. The programme is dedicated to transforming practices in knowledge production through active collaboration with IIAS.



**Professorial Fellowship for the Chair of Taiwan Studies at Leiden University and IIAS**  
 Are you a dedicated researcher and teacher who specialises in Taiwan Studies? You are welcome to apply for this professorship position, available for either five or ten months.



Information and application:  
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# IIAS Research, Networks, and Initiatives

IIAS research and other initiatives are carried out within a number of thematic, partially overlapping research clusters in phase with contemporary Asian currents and built around the notion of social agency. In addition, IIAS remains open to other potentially significant topics. More information: [www.iias.asia](http://www.iias.asia)

## IIAS Research Clusters

### Asian Cities

The Cities cluster examines urbanisation in Asia and beyond from a comparative perspective on cities in Asia and worldwide. The cluster comprises three inclusive research and activist networks (UKNA, SEANNET, RCN), forming a vibrant international knowledge platform for scholars and urban practitioners focusing on Asian cities 'in context' and beyond traditional Western knowledge norms.

### Asian Heritages

This cluster focuses on the uses of culture and cultural heritage practices in Asia. In particular, it addresses a variety of definitions associated with cultural heritage and their implications for social agency. The cluster engages with a broad range of related concepts and issues, including the contested assertions of 'tangible' and 'intangible', concepts such as 'authenticity', 'national heritage' and 'shared heritage', and, in general, with issues pertaining to the political economy of heritage.

### Global Asia

Asia has a long history of transnational linkages with other parts of the world, thereby shaping the global order, as much as the world at large continues to shape Asia. The Global Asia Cluster addresses contemporary issues related to Asia's projection into the world as well as transnational interactions within the Asian region itself. In addition IIAS aims to help develop a more evenly balanced field of Asian Studies by collaborating in trans-regional capacity building initiatives and by working on new types of methodological approaches that encourage synergies and interactions between disciplines, regions and practices.

## Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA)

UKNA is an 'umbrella' network of scholars and professionals interested in urbanism in Asia and Asian cities from an international perspective. It was established with core support from the EU between 2012 and 2016, connecting over 100 urban scholars from universities in Europe, China, Hong Kong, India, and Singapore. UKNA is coordinated from IIAS, but the network's strength is its partners and partnerships across Asia and beyond. Its current flagship projects are the Southeast Asia Neighborhoods Network (SEANNET) and the River Cities Network (RCN).



[www.ukna.asia](http://www.ukna.asia)

Coordinator: **Paul Rabé**

Email: [p.e.rabe@iias.nl](mailto:p.e.rabe@iias.nl)

Clusters: **Asian Cities; Asian Heritages**

## River Cities Network



The 'River Cities Network' (RCN) is a transdisciplinary and global network to promote the inclusive revitalisation of rivers and waterways and the landscapes /waterscapes, cities and neighbourhoods that co-exist with them. The Network comprises over 30 project teams from around the world, each of which critically examines a local river-city relationship (the 'river-city nexus'). RCN is coordinated from the Urban Cluster at IIAS. Its Board of Advisors includes prominent people in their fields from the Humanities, Social sciences, and Natural Sciences.

[www.ukna.asia/river-cities](http://www.ukna.asia/river-cities)

Coordinators: **Paul Rabé**

Email: [p.e.rabe@iias.nl](mailto:p.e.rabe@iias.nl)

and **Satya Patchineelam**

Email: [s.maia.patchineelam@iias.nl](mailto:s.maia.patchineelam@iias.nl)

Cluster: **Asian Cities**

## Leiden Centre for Indian Ocean Studies



The Leiden Centre for Indian Ocean Studies brings together people and methods to study the 'Indian Ocean World', aiming to co-organize conferences, workshops and academic exchanges with institutions from the region. Together with IIAS, the Centre facilitates an inclusive and global platform bringing together scholars and institutions working on connections and comparisons across the axis of human interaction with an interest in scholarship that cuts across borders of places, periods and disciplines.

[www.iias.asia/programmes/leiden-centre-indian-ocean-studies](http://www.iias.asia/programmes/leiden-centre-indian-ocean-studies)

Cluster: **Global Asia**

## Dual Degree in Critical Heritage Studies of Asia and Europe



This joint programme forms part of a broader ambition to decentralise the production of knowledge about Asia by establishing a platform for continuing dialogues between universities in different parts in the world. The institutions involved in the present Dual Degree programme – IIAS, Leiden University, National Taiwan University and Yonsei University, and, most recently Gajah Mada University – have established a fruitful collaboration in research and teaching and talks are underway with several universities in Asia and North Africa. The Dual Degree programme offers selected students the opportunity to follow a full year of study at one of the partner institutes with full credits and two MA degrees.

[www.iias.asia/programmes/critical-heritage-studies](http://www.iias.asia/programmes/critical-heritage-studies)

Coordinator: **Elena Paskaleva**

e.g. [paskaleva@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:paskaleva@hum.leidenuniv.nl)

Cluster: **Asian Heritages**



## Humanities Across Borders

'Humanities Across Borders' (HAB) is an educational cooperation programme, co-funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in New York, that aims to create shared, humanities-grounded, interdisciplinary curricula and context-sensitive learning methodologies at the graduate and postgraduate levels.

Twenty universities in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas contribute time and resources to this unique and innovative venture. The HAB partners have forged a vibrant international consortium, committed to building new humanist capacities at the inter-institutional level,

including thematic projects, syllabi, and joint classrooms with other continents.

This new phase (2021-2026) builds on the groundwork laid during the first phase of the programme, under the title 'Humanities across Borders: Asia and Africa in the World' (2016-2021).

Follow the stories on the [Humanities Across Borders Blog](https://www.humanitiesacrossborders.org/blog)  
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Clusters: [Global Asia](#); [Asian Heritages](#)

## Asian Borderlands Research Network (ABRN)

This network focuses particularly on the border regions between South Asia, Central/East and Southeast Asia. The concerns are varied, including migratory movements, transformations in cultural, linguistic and religious practices, ethnic mobilisation, conflict, marginalisation and environmental concerns. ABRN organises a conference in one of these border regions every two years in co-operation with a local partner.

Next ABRN Conference:

Negotiating Asian Borders: Actors, Displacements, Multiplicities, Sovereignities  
Irbid, Jordan, 2-4 September 2025  
Deadline CfP: 1 November 2024 (see page 5)

[www.iias.asia/programmes/asian-borderlands-research-network](https://www.iias.asia/programmes/asian-borderlands-research-network)  
Cluster: [Global Asia](#)

## Africa-Asia, A New Axis of Knowledge

'Africa-Asia, A New Axis of Knowledge' is an inclusive transnational platform that convenes scholars, artists, intellectuals, and educators from Africa, Asia, Europe, and beyond to study, discuss, and share knowledge on the intricate connections and entanglements between the African and Asian world regions. Our aim is to contribute to the long-term establishment of an autonomous, intellectual and academic community of individuals and institutions between two of the world's most vibrant continents. We aspire to facilitate the development of research and educational infrastructures in African and Asian universities, capable of delivering foundational knowledge in the two regions about one another's cultures and societies. This exchange, we believe, is a prerequisite for a sustainable and balanced socio-economic progress of the two continents. It is also an opportunity to move

beyond the Western-originated fields of Asian and African area studies—something that would benefit Asian, African and Western scholars alike.

An important development (in February 2023) is the birth of the 'Collaborative Africa-South East Asia Platform (CASAP)', a groundbreaking new network involving two universities in Indonesia and three in Africa.

Next Conference:

Africa-Asia, A New Axis of Knowledge - Third Edition  
Dakar, Senegal, 11-14 June 2025  
(See page 5)

[www.iias.asia/networks/africa-asia](https://www.iias.asia/networks/africa-asia)  
Cluster: [Global Asia](#)



## The Geopolitical Economy of Energy Transition: Comparing China's Belt and Road Initiative and the European Union

This interdisciplinary joint research programme between the Institute of European Studies of Macau and IIAS, in cooperation with Durham University (UK), brings together 25 researchers from 13 institutes in the EU and China to account for the dramatic transformations across Eurasia since 2000 vis-a-vis the energy security strategies of China and the EU and the two sides' interactions. The study includes approaches to fossil fuel supply security, climate change and the challenges of the transition to renewable energy, and investigates China's Belt and Road Initiative in 29 selected countries and regions in Europe, Asia, Africa and South America. The programme aims to help build new research collaborations, nurturing the participation of junior researchers. The expected research output includes publications of peer-reviewed monograph(s), special issues of key specialized peer-reviewed journals and policy briefings.

[www.iias.asia/programmes/geopolitical-economy-energy-transition-China-BRI-EU](https://www.iias.asia/programmes/geopolitical-economy-energy-transition-China-BRI-EU)

Inquiries: [Mehdi P. Amineh](mailto:Mehdi.P.Amineh@uva.nl)

Email: [m.p.amineh@uva.nl](mailto:m.p.amineh@uva.nl)

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## The Silk Road Virtual Museum

The Silk Road Virtual Museum is a collection of virtual museum sites and exhibitions that showcase the art and culture of the regions that lay on the historical trade routes between Europe and Asia. The mission of a virtual museum is to encourage people to explore and appreciate the cultures along the overland and maritime sea routes between the Far East and Europe. To date, the Silk Road Virtual Museum comprises 17 virtual museum sites and exhibitions and 12 eLibraries on a variety of topics. The research is being supported by students from the BA Degree in International Studies at Leiden University. Project development is being encouraged by an international network of scholars. The project is directed by VirtualMuseum360 and supported by IIAS.

If you are interested in setting up your own Virtual Museum, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

Coordinator: [Richard Griffiths](#),

Director of the VirtualMuseum360 project

E-mail: [info@silkroadvm.com](mailto:info@silkroadvm.com)

Website: <https://silkroadvirtualmuseum.com>

## Green Industrial Policy in the Age of Rare Metals (GRIP-ARM)

The ERC-funded research programme (2021-2026) *Green Industrial Policy in the Age of Rare Metals: A Transregional Comparison of Growth Strategies in Rare Earth Mining (GRIP-ARM)* examines the globalised supply and demand for rare earths, from mining to processing, manufacturing, use and recycling. Using a trans-regional comparison of China, Brazil and Kazakhstan, the proposed research is one of the first systematic, comparative studies on rare earths mining and economic development, bringing political science perspectives in conversation with natural resource geography and international political economy. GRIP-ARM is hosted by Erasmus University (Netherlands) and supported by IIAS.

[www.iias.asia/programmes/green-industrial-policy-age-rare-metals-grip-arm](https://www.iias.asia/programmes/green-industrial-policy-age-rare-metals-grip-arm)

Coordinator: [Jojo Nem Singh](#)

Email: [nemsingh@iss.nl](mailto:nemsingh@iss.nl)

Cluster: [Global Asia](#)

## International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS)

The International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) is the largest global forum for academics and civil society exchange on Asia. It serves as a platform for scholars, social and cultural leaders and institutions focusing on issues critical to Asia, and, by implication, the rest of the world. The ICAS biennial conferences are organised by IIAS in cooperation with local universities, cities and institutions and are attended by scholars and other experts, institutions and



publishers from around 60 countries. The biennial 'ICAS Book Prize' (IBP) awards prizes in the field of Asian Studies for books in Chinese, English, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish, and for PhD Theses in English. Thirteen conventions have been held since 1997 (Leiden, Berlin, Singapore, Shanghai, Kuala Lumpur, Daejeon, Honolulu, Macao, Adelaide, Chiang Mai, Leiden (again), Kyoto (online), and Surabaya).

See pages 42 to 49 for reflections on ICAS 13: 'Crossways of Knowledge – an International Conference-Festival' in Surabaya, Indonesia, 28 July–1 August 2024.

[www.icas.asia](https://www.icas.asia)

# The Imprint

The Imprint highlights the critical work of small publishers around the world. Such presses, often located beyond the Global North, produce some of the most innovative, incisive, locally informed, and high-quality books within and beyond Asian Studies. With countless books getting published each year, many titles do not receive the recognition or circulation they deserve. All too often, the global publishing houses and major university presses – those with resources to invest in promotion – receive an outsized share of attention. Whether works of research, translation, literature, or art, the publishers featured on The Imprint regularly experiment to push against the conventions of academic and popular trade publishing. In this edition, we are pleased to highlight a selection of recent titles from Tilted Axis Press.



## Tilted Axis Press

Tilted Axis Press is an independent publisher of contemporary literature by the Global Majority, translated into or written in a variety of Englishes. Founded in 2015, its practice is an ongoing exploration into alternatives – to the hierarchization of certain languages and forms of translation, and to the monoculture of globalization. Tilted Axis Press publishes six to nine books a year. It focuses on contemporary translated fiction and also publishes poetry and non-fiction. Tilted Axis' publishing practice foregrounds the complex movement of language, stories, and imaginations. Often fugitive and always trailblazing, its authors and translators challenge how we read, what we think, and how we view the world.



**Delicious Hunger**  
Hai Fan, translated  
by Jeremy Tiang

<https://www.tiltedaxispress.com/store/delicious-hunger-paperback>



**My Dream Job**  
Norman Erikson Pasaribu

<https://www.tiltedaxispress.com/store/my-dream-job-print>



**On a Woman's Madness**  
Astrid Roemer, translated  
by Lucy Scott

<https://www.tiltedaxispress.com/store/onawomansmadness-paperback>



**I Belong to Nowhere**  
Kalyani Thakur Charal, translated  
by Sipra Mukherjee and Mrinmoy  
Pramanick

<https://www.tiltedaxispress.com/store/i-belong-to-nowhere>



**No Edges: Swahili Stories**  
Various authors, translated  
by multiple translators

<https://www.tiltedaxispress.com/store/no-edges>



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Sang Young Park, translated  
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