



ARTS AND CULTURAL LEADERSHIP IN ASIA

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ROUTLEDGE

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Introduction

This chapter paints with a broad brush. The selection of strokes is made in the interest of widening understanding for those who make decisions (or are thinking about how to make decisions) about cultural engagement in the swirling waters outside their own, known pool of work. I have worked on hundreds of Australian/Asian cultural exchange projects over the last 25 years, mostly in the visual arts, but also across performing arts and writing exchanges, and remain frustrated that there is so little understanding both in the “West” and also in specific Asian countries of the backstory behind decisions made on the other side of the negotiating table.¹ I am on a continuous voyage of learning, and the insights and light-bulb moments of recognition remain some of the greatest rewards of this area of work. There remains a superficial response by Western visitors to Asia that as locals wear jeans, drink coffee, and frequently speak English, so they must also think and behave like Westerners.

More importantly, I am also aware of the advantages of how using a different cultural position might make for more successful outcomes both with each particular project, and also, in this increasingly global world, for practice in what is (in the West at least) a mono-cultural post-Enlightenment situation.

My broad brush strokes, perhaps subject to the criticism of “essentializing”, take many nomenclatures as given, like “Asia” and the “West”, though I am aware the distinctions within these are very cogent. Europeans, Americans and Australians all work in Asia differently, often dependent on their own country’s history of being a colonial power. I am yet to meet any Westerner for whom this issue does not in some way color their approach. American power (and literal colonial experience in the Philippines) is part of this, as is, for example, the *lack* of German colonial power in the region. Australians are aware of many regrettable actions in its association with Asia, with past official racism (the White Australia Policy, only rescinded in 1973) an ongoing memory for many, but our lack of colonial power and therefore less power-conscious attitude, our socio-economic size (small-medium), and our geographic proximity make for some advantage in this area. However, having

Challenges to cross-cultural understanding

It can be argued that there are broad cultural differences between the West and non-Western cultures based on different ideas of time and space. Let me elaborate, and start with time. In broad terms, the West has prized the precise measurement of progressive time, and the idea of progress itself, since the Enlightenment, which led into the great age of European colonization. The glory of the Enlightenment and justifiable Western pride in the achievements of scientists, engineers, philosophers, economists, political innovators, musicians, writers and artists, caught the crest of the colonization wave, and landed on the various beaches of these colonial outposts with loud and self-important crashes. Today we are at the end of this colonial period, sorting out the detritus of this landing on the shore, and the need to unpick the power of this Enlightenment certainty.

Concepts of time

Progressive time is measurable; it maps a future with only rare reference to the past, looking to a certain outcome at a generally accepted point of a process.² For arts managers in the West, this is taken for granted. In other cultures, including Indigenous Australia, other values of time take precedence. Buddhism and Hinduism promote circular time, with time repeating. It references back to the past. Arts practice often reflects this. An example is gamelan music in Indonesia which is based on cycles, building intensity, pulsating as the layers are added. Indigenous Australians look back to their ancestors, from where all reference points come.³ In Imperial East Asia, time is measured in the repeating eras of each dynasty, starting again with the beginning of a new family’s ascent to the throne. Arts managers in Indigenous Australia and Asian countries know of Western progressive time, and understand the (unthinkingly single-minded) expectations of Western colleagues. Nevertheless, there are countless examples of projects faltering because the rigid application of Western “time” is either not valued sufficiently or other time values have intruded. There are practical and cultural issues here. In practice, this means that when a project with a Western colleague is underway and another pressure occurs—such as a religious or family festival for example—the other pressure will often subvert the Western one, and subvert it without the local person informing the Westerner of its importance. The Westerner is left dangling. In practical terms, it means time-lines and forward planning are foreign and less-valued concepts. The measurements of a project’s life, such as time to plan, time to research, time to commit, time to raise funds, and so on, can be set aside—not because of laziness or slackness, but

men importance, and they can slip
It might be useful to think of this with more human values in mind: that this is a much saner way of life, with relational values of the type of engagement being more highly prized than ticking off the measurable (that is, numerical) outcomes. In the West, how often is a project done, those various “measurables” achieved, and then everyone moves on, without reflection, without really investigating whether or not it was worthwhile? In my experience, the joint, cross-cultural projects that took more time to set up, that had so many more cross-cultural issues raised in the process, that took more effort and often more money, were always the ones that people remembered, often for years and with great affection. The people in Asia with whom I worked on those projects are those I turn to today, often many years later, for further engagement—and they always say “yes”. I have argued for many years that government-sponsored “national” cultural events in other countries will be so much more effective if these principles are adopted. However, short-term “Western” time-lines and numbers take over, with little care for ongoing relationships. The outcomes are ticked off, the bureaucrats do one of their usual job-changes, relationships are cut off,⁴ the report is submitted and the juggernaut moves on.

The seesaw of valuing the arts—between the Western numerical measurable and the human quality of the experience of maker and audience—might learn from this different, non-Western point of view. More particularly, if Westerners who want to engage in Asia understand this and build their project around such understanding—growing projects over time spent on engagement, projects with various facets that might weave in and out, a series that reflects back, projects based on relationships than can flex rather than hard time-line projects without any human nuance—then they will be much more effective and rewarding.

And the point applies to various cultures within Asia working with each other. While they will be aware of the broader different issues of time, there will be local nuances (especially across belief differences) where understanding of what one’s partner is thinking about this issue, will result in a better outcome. A well-known example of the complex nature of how time is interpreted within Asia is the expectation of punctuality in Japan, unlike in many countries of South East Asia. In Japan, this punctuality is part of the importance of “respect” between people—a part of social, human interchange—rather than punctuality for its own sake.

Understanding of space

Space is harder to grasp for our purposes but is as important. The famous fish in the tank analogy works here: when looking at various objects, including fish in a glass fish tank, what do you “see” (Masuda and Nisbett 2001)? Westerners tend to see the foreground fish and Easterners tend to see the whole tank—the fish, large and small, the water, sand, glass and air. In other words,

with the individualism of Western culture. This is an issue articulated by Hegel in the early nineteenth century,⁵ analyzed by anthropologists and sociologists and critiqued by cultural commentators particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, and most famously by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, which is often translated, particularly for business groups, under the rubric of “cultural intelligence” (see Nisbett 2003 and Ch’ng 1997 as two examples; for local Australian tools, see UGM Consulting Pty Ltd 2010a, 2010b; for a reader in the area, see Samovar and Porter 1976). The most precise anthropological data is seen in Geert Hofstede’s graphs based on analyses of different cultures in the 1960s and 1970s (Hofstede 2010).⁶ However, these texts are ignored or unknown by those working in arts cross-cultural engagement, and while again bearing the taint of “essentializing”, they can shed light on this work, again, both for practical and broader conceptual reasons.

A very real example of spatio-relational ways of “seeing” a culture is how objects in museums are displayed. The museum has been a Western-devised “special place” separating objects from their context—and seeing them either isolated or/and in comparison with objects often coming from different contexts (either spoons, or Abstraction), taking not only conceptual context but physical context from each piece. In terms of Asian societies, each piece, like the fish in the tank, is seen in relation to what is happening in that space, either psychically or physically. Each piece needs to be part of a wider magic, or a wider truth.

One of the most effective museum displays I have seen was the Hiroshi Sugimoto solo exhibition at Mori Art Museum in Tokyo.⁷ Each piece was displayed in relation to each other, to the room and to how the audience would approach and move through that environment. Pieces were shown on the back of walls, so the person had to walk around to have the revelation; floors were raised and obvious museum spaces challenged, and small and large spaces enhanced the power of each piece. The visitor came out transformed, moved, excited: seeing the artist’s work in a way that took it into an experience of profundity. The whole had been staged by the artist himself, but with the support, obviously, of the museum. How often is this capacity ignored in displays, especially, of Asian art or art of cultures where this wider reality is so integral to it? Another example, closer to home, where the work itself triggered a physical (and emotional) engagement was Dadang Christanto’s *For those who are suffering* at the 1993 Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane. The audience spontaneously brought in flowers and laid them through the installation, acknowledging the power of the work, and passing on to other people viewing this, that we can be literally involved in such a display. There is lip service currently, but what if museum designers were given a course in Asian cultural philosophies, to see the *advantage* of taking on board a more holistic way to approach this? It would modulate the experience of the visitor through a cross-cultural collection, and add to the

Communal and individualistic arts practices

Christine Nicholls, writing in *The Conversation* in July 2013, describes the way Central Desert Aboriginal culture inculcates an awareness of relational space into the smallest babies. They nod to directions in relation to themselves, rather than an abstracted, mathematical understanding of an area (Nicholls 2013).⁸ The nature of the whole implies that all parts have a place within it—it is a communal understanding, with each individual having a place within society. To go against this—putting one's hand up and getting individual attention—breaks the harmony of this understanding. In arts engagement, a younger individual questioning an elder, who may be the agreed spokesperson for the group, destabilizes the accepted order, and provokes consternation. Young people looking an older person too boldly in the eye breaks protocol. Western foreigners are given some allowance for such bad behavior but if the right behavior is acknowledged, the project will go so much more smoothly. There are numerous examples of the strength of the hold of this communal way in Asia and its impact on cross-cultural engagements. One is a natural conservatism from officialdom, not wanting to stand out and take a risk. It might end with a 'loss of face', but it also makes that individual seem to be putting him- or herself above the rest. Groups make decisions, including in curatorial settings. The status quo often holds for this same reason—'risk' is a problem culturally. The more conservative the group or institution, the more likely this will be the scenario.

It means that younger, more provocative individuals will either work for less institutional employers, including private and philanthropic companies and individuals, or for projects that need international (Western) understandings, like Biennales, where greater cultural leniency can be possible. The tensions in the organization of some Biennales in Asia comes from the pressure to conform to harmonious, communal values, and to make a project that by its nature in international contemporary art circles, challenges those values. The issue with the *Jakarta Biennale IX* of 1993–94 is an example of the disjunction between local and "international" values in the visual arts, with artists, organizers, funders, and audiences in a melee of upset, and ultimately leading to the demise of the project.⁹ I cannot think of Biennales in the West where this becomes such an issue.

Innovation by artists can be seen as inappropriate or disrespectful in the face of traditional respect for the established way. Traditional practice like brush painting in East Asia is more subject to this, but the knowledge of the traditions remains through the more avant-garde sectors, which often reflect on it or overtly reject it as part of their personal stand. This does not happen in the West. Academic oil painting, for example, might be part of a critique but the focus is not as loaded as it is in the East. It seems ironic that Chinese artists

mitting to the next generation. The Chinese had to learn the practice of oil painting from the Soviet Russian example under Mao's directive in the early 1950s, and it became the center of their academic art practice, so their skills even today are outstanding.

This idea of the importance of the group, of communalism, and suspicion or even rejection of individualism has echoes in other forms of arts practice to do with Asia internationally. One trend in (Western) art museums has been for Asian art departments to focus on iconography, rather than treat the artwork as Western art would be—with Western art historical stylistic analysis, endeavoring to see individual masters, ateliers and trends through the art under their analysis.¹⁰ An issue for Asian art departments has been their separation from mainstream sections of museums. The very expertise expected in language and culture makes specialists of the staff and can set up ghetto mentalities, something governance of many museums seem either unwilling or unable to address. The "Eastern" mindset mitigating against approbation of individual artistic achievement has led to an equally Eastern communal approach to curatorial research: themes, content or iconography, the group style, are what curators identify rather than significant individual artist research and the building of an understanding of their particular oeuvre.

How many detailed monographs of pre-twentieth-century artists of the East exist? Not many. Imagine Rubens being a name amongst the Flemish school without the research to uncover every one of his drawings, paintings, and students? This Western art historical methodology of minute and careful recording is just one way to undertake museum work. It can, indeed, obscure the great enjoyment of the spirit of an artwork, which may be the central desire for audiences, both secular and religious, in the East.¹¹ But perhaps both approaches can be applied. A challenge to this in 2011 has been the Rietberg Museum in Zurich's research into the ateliers of the Mughal and Rajput rules of India, identifying more than 40 masters and their styles.¹² Australia has provided a mixed response in extending this individual acknowledgement to Indigenous art. Certainly Indigenous artists' names are known and their oeuvre respected, but besides two or three individuals (e.g. Emily Kngwarreye or Rover Thomas), their names are not remembered by Western audiences—they become part of the general communal group known as Indigenous Art. A similar situation applies to Balinese masters—a few individuals are identified amongst the great number of artists who come under first the Balinese, then the individual township stylistic banners.

The respect for seniority, tradition and the communal whole has led to what I see as mistakes in the presentation of Eastern art in the institutions of the West, notably the collecting museums. We put aside the question of whether this activity is both the best use of resources and the best way to introduce such cultures to those in the West (very debatable points), to see how it has played out in London. Two of the most prestigious, old-fashioned, patriarchal

been targeted by Korea and Japan. (The work has been placed near the side stairs (the Korean work at the Victoria & Albert Museum) or up the back stairs (Japanese at the British Museum); both areas little visited and noticed by the rank and file of visitors. I noticed a sense of regret on the faces of the visiting nationals of those countries. I suspect their efforts would have been much more effective at a more overtly iconoclastic institution such as the Tate Modern. But, and this is my surmise, the instinctive response of the decision-makers of the East was the desire to be aligned with those more venerable, respectable places.

Why is it so?

Why are these different impulses so strong? Unsurprisingly, they come from culture, and culture comes from a millennia of ways of doing things. All of Confucianism's themes deal with your place in the hierarchy, in relation to others so to create social harmony. They are about humanity (*ren*), with its ethic of reciprocity, building up favors, doing things from a mutually pleasing position, and can include "ritual", or knowing your duty to family and society, and loyalty or filial piety. Another important theme is righteousness (*yi*), which is how you behave in society, avoiding shame and loss of face, again knowing your place in the hierarchy. Hinduism and its *dharma* are about the way you act, being dutiful, moral, selfless, respectful and not harming others. You achieve reincarnation through your *karma*, or good deeds, again in society. And you believe in the constant cycle of birth, life and death, *samsara*. Buddhism believes all things are interdependent. Islam believes in the principle of equality: in the importance of the communal. One of the Five Pillars of the faith is giving alms, that is, building in the provision of part of your individual income towards the support of the community (Christianity has this expectation but it is part of your *individual* conscience). It encourages kindness and modesty—neither, I think, qualities at the forefront of most Western contemporary arts practice. Even the Christian Philippines evinces a sense of festive Latino-communalism very different from the cool practices of, say, the non-Catholic current day West.

Conclusion

Those Western visitors, seeing the jeans and coffee, can miss the importance of Confucianism in north Asia, of Buddhism throughout the region, the Filipino enthusiasm for their form of Christianity, being born into Hinduism in the sub-continent, the strength of belief in Islam in the Malay world, and all the permutations of these main threads. And they can miss how using some of the ideas behind these threads might enhance their own capacity to make the

Notes

- 1 Frustratingly it remains a major issue in Australia. Education both at secondary and tertiary level has been lacking in its focus on Asian cultural realities, despite the past Gillard Government's *Asian Century* White Paper of 2013. The current Abbot Government is notable for saying there is too much focus on Asia in secondary schools (see www.abc.net.au/news/2014-01-10/pyne-calls-for-national-curriculum-to-focus-on-benefits-of-west/5193804 [accessed February 8, 2014]). In contrast, see Carroll and Gantner (2012: 49–53) for a discussion of the *lack* of teaching on Asian performing arts in the tertiary sector in the last 20 years in Australia.
- 2 I recently came upon a telling example of cultural value of "time": in 1901, Ottoman Turkey built 100 clock towers throughout the country, to reinforce a new "Western, modern, progressive" understanding of time, which in the past had been measured by the imam's call to prayer.
- 3 The importance of this understanding is demonstrated by the last words spoken in *Yolgnu Boy*, the 2001 film directed by Stephen Johnson, by its hero Lorrpu, as he learns the wisdom of his traditional life, "time isn't a line, it's a circle".
- 4 The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has set up a number of bilateral people-to-people agencies over the last 20 years with specific Asian countries in mind: Indonesia, Japan, China, India and so on. At first, they employed country specialists to run each agency, but gradually these were replaced by the revolving door of officials moving to their "next appointment" (some of whom had not visited the country of their focus). It was explained to me that this "arm's length" view, without the sully of personal relationship, was positive for their objective handling of their work. In the light of the argument I am putting in this chapter, this seems a contradiction in terms.
- 5 German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) said, as part of his *Philosophy of History*, in 1831, a text widely known in both Europe and Asia, "The first phase [of history]—that with which we have to begin—is the *East*. Unreflected consciousness—substantial, objective, spiritual existence—forms the basis; to which the subjective will first sustains a relation in the form of faith, confidence, obedience. In the political life of the East we find a realized rational freedom, developing itself without advancing to *subjective* freedom. It is the childhood of History. Substantial forms constitute the gorgeous edifices of Oriental *Empires* in which we find all rational ordinances and arrangements, but in such a way, that individuals remain as mere accidents", available at: www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hi/history3.htm#036 (accessed April 4, 2014).
- 6 Hofstede quantified five cultural characteristics: power distance index, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance index and long-term orientation. His chart of "Australian" culture (viz settler culture) shows an individualism index of above 90/100 and "Asian countries" with this same characteristic measured at 20/100.
- 7 *Hiroshi Sugimoto; End of Time*, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, September 17, 2005–January 9, 2006.
- 8 Nicholls notes linguist Mary Laugren's words, "Desert children's ability to handle directional and spatial terminology in particular is taken as a sort of intelligence test similar to the counting prowess test among Europeans".
- 9 The whole is described by the exhibition curator, Jim Supangkat (2013).
- 10 A recent Australian example is the Art Gallery of South Australia's exhibition *Realms of Wonder: Jain, Hindu and Islamic Art of India*, October 19, 2013–January 27,

- 11 The well-known example of Chinese disdain for the pedantry of Western art and its lack of the true feeling created by the energy of the well-used Chinese brush, is by 17th-century court artist Zou Yigui, “the Westerners are skilled in geometry, and consequently there is not the slightest mistake in their rendering light and shade and distance. In their paintings all the figures, buildings, and trees cast shadows, and their brush and colours are entirely different from those of Chinese painters. Their views stretch out from broad (in the foreground) to narrow (in the background) and are defined (mathematically measured). When they paint houses on a wall people are tempted to walk into them. Students of painting may well take over one or two points from them to make their own paintings more attractive to the eye. But these painters have no brush-manner whatsoever; although they possess skill, they are simply artisans and cannot consequently be classified as painters”, quoted in Sullivan (1973: 85).
- 12 *The Way of the Master; The Great Artists of India, 1100–1900*, Museum Rietberg, Zurich, May 1–August 21, 2011. The introductory wall text read, “the history of Indian art is full of great painters. But although their paintings have been highly acclaimed for a very long time, little was known about their lives and careers”. New research is changing that. “Now for the first time it is possible to present a survey of more than 40 of the greatest Indian painters from 1100–1900”.

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