

## CONFERENCE REVIEW

# Review of Museum of Our Own: In Search of Local Museology for Asia

Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 18–20 November 2014

Yunci Cai\*

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Since the publication of the seminal volume by MacDonald and Fyfe (1996) which calls for a theorization of museums in terms of their contexts, contests and contents, there have been many endeavours to rethink and reconceptualise the museum, to consider attempts to 'decolonise' the museum and to integrate more non-traditional museum spaces and practices into the fold of the Eurocentric literature on museology. The international conference on 'Museum of Our Own: In Search of Local Museology for Asia', organised jointly by the Universitas Gadjah Mada (Indonesia) and National Museum of World Cultures (Netherlands) from 18 to 20 November 2014 in the city of Yogyakarta in Indonesia, is one of the first few attempts in Asia to respond to these debates, and particularly, explore the possible existence of a set of museological models and practices that is unique to Asia.

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November 2014 in the city of Yogyakarta in Indonesia, is one of the first few attempts in Asia to respond to these debates, and particularly, explore the possible existence of a set of museological models and practices that is unique to Asia.

The organisers of the 'Museum of Our Own' conference invited participants to contribute papers on one of five themes: (a) Writing museum histories in Southeast Asia, (b) The West and the Rest: the development of the theory of museology, (c) Museum and heritage, (d) Conservation, and (e) Museology education in Southeast Asia, with the aim of distilling the elements of an Asian-centric museology in each of these five themes. The conference attracted over 100 participants from different parts of the world with a large entourage of museum professionals from Southeast Asia, due to the

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\* MPhil/PhD Candidate in Museum Studies, Institute of Archaeology, University College London  
[yunci.cai.13@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:yunci.cai.13@ucl.ac.uk)

scheduling of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation – Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SEAMEO-SPAFA) Museum Forum on Southeast Asian Museums in Yogyakarta on 21 November 2014 to coincide with the conference.

Over three days, including a fieldtrip on the second day, the conference comprised a keynote speech and two plenary presentations on the first day, and 36 oral presentations on the five themes which were held in four parallel sessions on the third day. Each presenter was allowed about ten to twenty minutes, depending on the moderators, to outline his or her key arguments, with the remaining time dedicated to questions, comments and discussions. This format worked well, as it allowed each participant to take part in the session that was most relevant to his/her area of interest. A selection of papers from the conference will also be published as conference proceedings planned for distribution in October 2015.

Overall, this conference was a significant milestone in the development of Southeast Asian museology, as it brought together prominent academics, researchers and museum professionals for the first time to discuss and debate about the key trends and museological practices in Southeast Asia. Over the three days, new ideas were shared and challenges facing the regional museum landscape were discussed. Due to the institutional influence of the organisers, a significant number of papers focused on the Dutch-Indonesian museums relations from the colonial period to the present, offering much depth and rich insights into museological exchanges and collaborations between the Netherlands and Indonesia, to balance the breadth offered by the presentations focusing on the museological developments in the other ten<sup>1</sup> Southeast Asian countries. In what follows, I will highlight the key themes that emerged from the conference, which will continue to shape the discourses on Southeast Asian museology in the years to come.

### **Day One: Defining a Southeast Asian Museology**

The conference opened with a traditional Javanese dance performance entitled 'Tari Gotek Menak', and a keynote speech by Dr. Harry Widiyanto. Dr. Widiyanto spoke on the development of the Sangiran Museum Complex, which showcased the archaeological finds and ongoing research on the Sangiran archaeological site, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where the fossils of the 'Java Man' were discovered, as a preamble to the fieldtrip on the following day. The highlight of the conference was the plenary session by two renowned guest speakers, namely: Associate Professor John N. Miksic from the National University of Singapore, who discussed the development of museum education in Southeast Asia, and Associate Professor Christina F. Kreps from the Denver University (USA), who is a key proponent of the 'appropriate museology' concept in museum studies.

A/P Miksic proffered many ideas about the different forms heritage and cultural preservation might take in the context of Southeast Asia. He suggested that the local concept of *pusaka*, a word of unknown but possibly Sanskrit origin which can be roughly translated as 'heirlooms', could be interpreted as the first manifestation of museums in Southeast Asia. He argued that *pusaka* emerged in Southeast Asia in parallel with the advent of the museum concept in the West, during which the treasures and heirlooms such as religious sculptures, textiles, scriptures and jars were collected by local communities in Southeast Asia, and handed down through the generations in monasteries, temples or family homes, as well as through religious sites such as the Borobudur temple. He added that the concept of *pusaka* exists in many areas in Southeast Asia, where it is still popular among local communities, and could be considered as a form of museological practice. He also highlighted the proliferation of folk museums and museums focusing on rural

cultures as an emergent museum trend in Southeast Asia. He concluded by suggesting five recommendations for the development of museum education in Southeast Asia, viz.: (a) acknowledge and study local ideas about material cultures, (b) study and foster development of private, outdoor, local, urban and university museums, (c) figure out ways to explore the hybrid, dynamic, evolving nature of cultures, (d) promote proactive acquisition, especially of items of popular culture, and (e) find ways to bridge the local, national and regional cultures of Southeast Asia, focusing on the cross-cultural influences from within Southeast Asia and with other parts of the world.

A/P Kreps discussed the shift from 'colonial' museology widely practised in Southeast Asia up to the 1980s, to the increasing need to be sensitive to the local contexts and practise 'appropriate museology'. She demonstrated how museums could practise 'appropriate museology', by discussing examples from her research with the native communities in America, as well as from her work in Indonesia and Thailand. Using the example of a storage/treasure box from the Kwakwaka'wakw tribe of the Northwest Coast of the US and Canada, she showed how such objects could have multiple functions, meanings, values, and could appeal to different senses and not just be 'objects for the eyes' as prescribed in Western museums. The treasure box, A/P Kreps argues, has also been likened to a museum in indigenous form, as in the case of the U'mista Museum and Cultural Centre in British Columbia, A/P Kreps suggests that there is a need to move beyond a western-centric object-based epistemology that configures objects primarily as information carriers and part of 'object-information packages' to approaches that also include the multisensory nature of objects and their multiple interpretations and intangible properties. She further demonstrates how 'appropriate museology' can be applied through reconciling local, indigenous curatorial traditions with western museology in the

case of the Museum Balanga in Kalimantan, Indonesia where museum staff acknowledge the existence of spirits and supernatural powers residing in museum objects by engaging with spiritual leaders to curate exhibitions and perform purifying rituals on these objects as part of the museum's collection management strategies. Lastly, A/P Kreps demonstrates how Thai monastery museums exemplify the concept of 'appropriate museology' by integrating elements of local curatorship, reflecting local communities' ways of perceiving objects and their relationships with the objects. For example, she describes the common practice of renewing museum objects, such as Buddha figures, by repainting or replacing them instead of preserving the objects for posterity in the western sense. She also describes how the donation of objects to a museum can be a form of merit-making, and how ritual prohibitions on the removal of museum objects is a means of safeguarding them. She concluded her talk by reiterating the need to recognise the existence of multiple museologies, in which each community creates its own version of museology appropriate to its local context.

### **Day Two: Fieldtrip to Sangiran Museum Complex and Danar Hadi Batik Museum**

The conference included a fieldtrip to the Sangiran Museum Complex in Sragen and the Danar Hadi Batik Museum in Solo to observe local expressions of the museum idea and museology. The Sangiran Museum Complex sits on a globally significant archaeological site. According to the UNESCO Advisory Body Evaluation report on the site, 'Sangiran is recognized by scientists to be one of the most important sites in the world for studying 'fossil man', or the paleontological record of human development, ranking alongside Zhoukoudian (China), Willandra Lakes (Australia), Olduvai Gorge (Tanzania), and Sterkfontein (South Africa), and more fruitful in finds than any of these' (1995, 46). The Sangiran Museum Complex is a 1.6

hectare site comprising four museum clusters, showcasing the archaeological finds from the Sangiran Early Man Site, also known as 'Homeland of the Java Man'. The conference participants had the opportunity to visit the Krikilan cluster, completed in December 2011 featuring a visitor centre focusing on the story of human evolution over time, and a research centre for the study of the Java Man, as well as the Bukuran cluster, newly completed in 2014 to showcase the fossils from the Sangiran Early Man Site. The visit to the Krikilan cluster and the Bukuran cluster, offered conference participants an opportunity to learn about one of the Indonesian government's latest efforts to preserve and showcase a globally significant archaeological site under its purview.

The Dinar Hadi Batik Museum showcases one of the finest Batik collections in Java. Established by Mr. Santosa Doellah, the founder of the Batik Dinar Hadi, a business producing upmarket Batik products for sale, to showcase his private collections, the Dinar Hadi Batik Museum reflects an emergent museological trend in Southeast Asia, which is the proliferation of private galleries set up by collectors, who also run commercial entities related to the collections being showcased. These trends attest to the blurring of boundaries between the role of museums as repositories of material heritage vis-à-vis their roles in heritage businesses in the form of marketing and creating value for the heritage products on sale. It is worth highlighting that the art of Batik making is intertwined with identity-making in the Indonesian context, as different cities such as Solo and Yogyakarta have their unique signature design, and therefore Batik has a significant place in local and national identity formation in Indonesia.

### **Day Three: Emerging Trends in Southeast Asian Museology**

The conference concluded with lively debates in four parallel sessions responding to the themes of: (a) Writing museum in Southeast Asia, (b) Conservation, (c) The West and

the Rest: the development of the theory of museology, and (d) Museology education in Indonesia. I participated in the session on 'The West and the Rest: the development of the theory of museology' moderated by Dr. Wayne Modest from the National Museum of World Cultures, Netherlands. In this session, there were attempts by some presenters to subvert the dichotomy between the West and the Rest by exploring the collaborations and connections between museums that reside in Europe and Southeast Asia, for example, by examining the post-colonial return of collections to the former colonies, as well as the dynamics of representing national identity in a post-colonial context for both the former empires and colonies. Several other presenters focused on the emergence of community-based museums in Southeast Asia as an alternative museum model for Southeast Asia. The discussions that ensued explored the growing politicisation of cultural heritage over the last decade by its stakeholders, such as the nation-states, interest groups or communities themselves, who drew upon the museum as a site of power negotiations and contestations in their struggles over community rights and representations.

While I did not participate in the other three sessions, I had the opportunity to review all the presentation slides, which were subsequently distributed to the conference participants. In the session on 'Writing museum in Southeast Asia' moderated by Professor Bambang Purwanto from the Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia, the presenters discussed the emergence and evolution of the museum institution in Southeast Asia from the colonial period to the present day through a selection of case studies from Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam. One presenter explored how the Indonesian government's museum policy influenced the development of the local museum landscape, while another presenter talked about the evolution of a municipal museum in Indonesia over the years. Other presenters spoke of the roles of specialist museums in

Southeast Asia, which addressed the needs of local communities, such as the network of tsunami museums in Indonesia and Thailand in memorialising the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean Earthquake and Tsunami, and the Vietnamese Women's Museum in contemplating gender issues in Vietnam. A recurring theme which united these presentations was the idea that museums in Southeast Asia had emerged and evolved in response to the prevailing circumstances in Southeast Asia to serve local needs, rather than one that merely borrowed from the western notion of the museum institution.

The adoption of local knowledge and practices in museum conservation and curatorship surfaced as a recurrent theme during the session on 'Conservation' moderated by Dr. Mahirta from the Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia. Presenters shared how their museums had applied indigenous methods of conservation drawn from traditional recipes and the use of local ingredients such as spices for the conservation of their collections, likening the conservation laboratory in a Southeast Asian museum as a 'grandmother's kitchen' in which one experiments with different concoctions of natural ingredients to create the perfect dishes. Others talked about how their museums adopted non-traditional methods of museum showcase such as open-air displays and cultural villages, which could better convey the cultural heritage and traditions of Southeast Asia.

In the session on 'Museology education in Southeast Asia' moderated by Drs. Pim Westerkamp from the National Museum of World Cultures, Netherlands, presenters offered insights into the plethora of approaches undertaken by their institutions to enhance museum training and education, and to better engage with their audiences. Many presenters emphasized the need for collaborations of museums with universities and local communities to improve their offerings and reap mutual benefits. Others discussed strategies implemented by the museums to enhance museum communication and object interpretation. These case

studies demonstrated the different ways in which museums in Southeast Asia had modified or adapted their museological approaches and practices over time to meet the needs of their communities and local contexts.

The conference concluded with closing remarks and expressions of gratitude by both the conference organisers and participants, and another fascinating performance of a traditional Javanese dance entitled 'Tari Bambang Cakil'. The encounters and discussions that took place over the three-day conference offered ample evidence to suggest the existence of indigenous, locally-sensitive approaches to museology in the Southeast Asia. These may exist in many forms, for example in traditional value systems such as keeping heirlooms that will be evident to us only when we suspend our preconceived notions about how museums should look like, in the role of museums in addressing and responding to local needs and contexts, in the different manners of contemplating with the museums' collections and engaging with its audiences, as well as in adopting indigenous knowledge and practices in museum conservation and curatorship. These resonate strongly with A/P Kreps' argument that there are multiple museologies that exist in the museum landscape in Southeast Asia, in which each community creates its own version of museology appropriate to its local context, and hence, one should liberate our thinking from Eurocentric notions of what constitutes a museum and museological behaviour to recognise other forms of its manifestations, as well as to liberate cultures from western regimes of museum management and curatorship.

Overall, this was a very fruitful conference, and certainly, an eventful one in the history of the development of Southeast Asian museology. I believe that this conference has triggered a series of stimulating discussions and debates about practising museology in the Southeast Asian context, and I hope that there will be more such opportunities in the near future, so that museum

professionals, academics and researchers working in the field of Southeast Asian museology can come together to collectively theorise and shape the development of museology in Southeast Asia.

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### Declaration

The author has declared no competing interests.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The other ten Southeast Asian countries are: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam.

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