

# Editorial Note

The “Exhibit Asia: Exploring National Image and Identity through Exhibition” journal project consists of four articles spread across two issues, each focused on either one or several Asian countries. Collectively, they explore how the identity and public image of four Asian countries – China, Japan, India and Pakistan – were formed and projected through exhibitions, art displays and model villages from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s.

One trend when looking at the history of international exhibitions held from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards is through the lens of Culture theory and Postcolonial theory. In terms of Culture theory, much focus is placed on analysing the meaning of the representation of displays, examining both signifiers in use and what, in turn, is signified through the arrangement of images. As for Postcolonial theory, alongside similar concerns about the meaning of representation, concepts of racism and power are introduced, in order to differentiate the positions of coloniser and colonised, and also to explore the dynamics of exploitation.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to international exhibitions, museums, particularly of the large, state-sponsored variety, have been vital resources for constructing knowledge in the West about the wider world. Such institutions became the dominant bodies in the effort of scrutinising materials with the intent of collating and codifying the knowledge and output of non-western cultures.<sup>2</sup> In his study on how “Orientals” were projected in the eyes of Westerners in the nineteenth century, Timothy Mitchell used as an example distortions introduced by western curators in the process of constructing and displaying themes and objects in exhibitions. Using the experience of Egyptian delegations to the International Congress of Orientalists in Stockholm in 1889, Mitchell noted that the methods adopted for representing cultures in both museums and exhibitions contained fundamental problems which made accurate understanding of remote cultures impossible. However, in questioning the modern European approach of attempting to understand the world through visual observation in either exhibitions or museum displays, we nevertheless also recognise the strength of ongoing knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Penelope Harvey, *Hybrids of Modernity: Anthropology, the Nation State and the Universal Exhibition* (London, UK: Routledge, 1996). For further reflection on museums and exhibitions related to Postmodernism see *Museums and Their Communities*, ed. Sheila E. R. Watson (London, UK: Routledge, 2007), notably Chapter 3 and Chapter 17.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Mitchell, ‘The World as Exhibition’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no.2 (1989), 217-236.

exchange, and the importance in particular of recognising the agency of the Asian countries under discussion as they continue the process of constructing and making sense of national identities. Markus Daechsel's article on housing projects and model villages provides an effective example of how architecture was utilised for such purposes.

The research brought together for this journal project demonstrates hybrid and fluid approaches in presenting and projecting national identities adopted by four Asian countries. The cases we explore have their own historical contextual significance, reflecting different global political situations from the high peak of colonialism, to expansion of imperialism, and on to the beginnings of de-colonisation.

The first case study, by Weipin Tsai, is of China's participation in the Universal Exhibition in Vienna in 1873, its first official presence at such an event. The article highlights how presentation of the material culture of the Qing Empire was shaped through the lens of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, a Chinese organisation for tariff collection largely run by foreign staff. This case study sits within the context of the great enthusiasm for international fairs characteristic of the emergent and rapidly globalising international order of the period. Rather than organise its own participation directly, the Qing government appointed Robert Hart, the Inspector General of Chinese Maritime Customs Service, to take charge. In effect, the model that emerged for China's participation continued to be used for future international exhibitions for the following three decades. The mixed sense of identities presented by this foreign-staffed Chinese organisation at the Vienna Exhibition not only demonstrates how an old empire compromised and negotiated its approaches in playing a part in an unfamiliar new world order, but also illuminates a complex of knowledge between West and East at the time.

The second article, by Shahmima Akhtar, shifts focus to a new imperial arrival on the world stage. The Japan-British Exhibition of 1910, described in its publicity as being held in the name of "Two Island Empires of the East and West", formed Japan's introduction as an explicitly imperial power. Japan had built up substantial experience of such events from its participation in many previous international exhibitions; this event, however, had a particular context in celebrating the alliance between Britain and Japan which had been signed in 1902. In order to demonstrate the political and economic significance of the alliance, parallel displays were carefully managed during the five-month long exhibition. The article explores how Japan represented its status by displaying items from its northern indigenous minority, the Ainu, and from its colonies, particularly Formosa; while a model Irish village was reconstructed at the exhibition ground to illustrate the United Kingdom's own diversity of peoples.

The third and fourth articles, by Mrinalini Venkateswaran and Markus Daechsel respectively, focus on the period after the Second World War, when imperialism was crumbling and yet another new international order was forming. After nearly two centuries of rule on the Indian sub-continent, Britain withdrew in August 1947, alongside partition. Amidst the turmoil of mass migration and widespread inter-communal violence, two new nation states, India and Pakistan, were formed. Starting two months after partition, the Royal Academy of Arts Exhibition of Indian Art was held in London, running until the end of February 1948. The exhibition itself, featuring objects predominately from India and Pakistan, received mixed reviews at the time. However, the critics' response is not the focus here. Rather, this piece explores a much less recognised dimension of the exhibition: its role and impact in the construction of new national identities for these newly-independent countries.

In contrast to the previous three articles, with their focus on specific exhibitions, the fourth investigates cold war modernity through mass housing projects and the visual presentations associated with them. Set in 1950s and 1960s Pakistan, the two housing projects examined featured 'exhibition sectors' which were specially curated to be shown to a select audience of visiting experts and dignitaries. There were also permanent exhibition villages planned in Islamabad in order to show, now to a wider public, how far removed the new mass housing had become from the area's own architectural "past". In this encounter with fluidity in visual presentation through architecture and the design of new communities, one of the questions intimately tied up with such exhibitions is the relationship between a new global sense of modernism, a specific sense of "developmental modern" that applied to the whole Global South as a space of historical change, and much more specific and local notions of identity and historical agency.

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