Postcolonial dialogues

In November 2011 IIAS hosted a two-day roundtable, tentatively titled The Postcolonial Dialogues. The idea was simple, yet we were well aware of the complexities that came with this so-called simplicity. In terms of the colonial experience and postcolonial realities, our task at hand was to explore what has been left unsaid, untouched upon, undocumented, unexplored or maybe even purposely ignored. What, in short, should our agenda be the coming years when speaking of ‘postcolonialism’? We were, however, all in agreement of one thing from the start: much has already been said. Another thing we firmly agreed on is that this does not mean there are no more issues to be dealt with.

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The study of postcolonial dialogues, by definition, does not do ‘firm’ conclusions; its very purpose seems even to avoid reaching them. This may have its roots in the colonial experience itself, which is quintessentially hegemonic, dominating, dividing, and firm in its determination to get its message across. The study of postcolonialism is characterized by a whole plethora of often disagreeing voices giving firm voice to issues left unaddressed, unmet, swept under the carpet, or simply evading the discussion end, also a body of work that never quite (fully) in agreement. And thus was the roundtable held without a firm agenda, building on the objective that what we were coming together for was actually to determine what the agenda for the coming years should be.

And just not that, the sheer mention of a possible agenda already denoted something important and something that we were desperately trying to avoid: that one would have to be continued in one sense postcolonialism, in both theory and practice, has always been an agenda of sorts. It has always come with a particular plan to steer ‘things’ in a certain direction; it has always been imbued by and layered with power relations. And thus one has come together without an agenda, but certainly not without having done our homework.

In a Background Document (available on the IAS website) a brief history of postcolonialism (as a field of study) was provided, after which a number of in-depth analyses were made of a number of possible topics for future research and, of course, ‘dialogue’. The final chapter of this document was titled ‘Not yet a Conclusion’ and took the reader on a ‘post’-visit to a modern art exhibition, a trip into the postcolonial realities of the present. Some of these scenes will be reproduced here in this article.

The scenes are based on experiences and observations, no scholarly research was conducted and thus they are somewhat ‘anecdotal’, almost ‘entertaining’, in their description. But this is very much on purpose, as what is hoped to be accomplished by this, is to trigger further thinking in terms of instances, situations, and references, from which a certain (problematic, contested, colonized) mentality emerges that we need to think through and talk about and that could form the basis for a future research agenda.

A Dutch issue: what do we do with Jan Pieterszoon Coen?
The statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen ([5 January 1587 – 27 September 1629) was one of Singapore’s most important artists, and accordingly, a guiding figure in the shaping of Singapore’s art scene – at the Singapore Art Museum, opens up such an opportunity.

Liu Kang’s work is spectacularly colourful, depicting village communal life, local traditions, and most importantly, many Balinese women carrying one thing or the other (though mostly pots). At times it is like seeing an anthropologist at work, painting his observations, displaying an almost intimate knowledge of the ‘materiality’ of the scene. Many of his paintings also communicate a sense of innocence, of times gone by, of a Western painter, painting the east, painting the painting of the west to – not so much by Kang but by the way he is celebrated in the museum – is an idealized version of the East; one that has a larger perspective (of the West and the Asia) that Singapore is telling its audience here? and who is this audience actually imagined to be? What is being communicated here? What is being told, as far as Kang is concerned, is that Singapore is telling its audience about the part that, past coloured and imbued with the painter’s perspective (fig. 4)

A critic might ponder the question ‘what if this had been a Western painter, painting the east, painting the image of the East? But that is not on our agenda here. This is not an inquisition à la Said, unscrambling the hidden (self)orientation in this particular work. No, what we the reader is invited to partake in is another question, a question raised on the second floor of the museum by a kind lady who wanted to make sure nobody missed this extraordinary opportunity. Dress up it said in bold letters on the wall with the written, underneath on an equally white table lay a number of costumes, from which straw hats, colourful sarongs and a nice basket to hold ‘something’. Attributes that could have featured in Liu Kang’s paintings, symbolizing a way of life, that could stand for the larger whole – a particular feeling, atmosphere, even a certain reality (see front cover photo).

Once dressed up, people could have their picture taken and it sent home by email. However if, for stop a minute, and let is in what the museum is asking of us, a curious thing begins to occur, something that lets itself best be described in terms of ‘exposure’. As mentioned, the colonial is mostly absent in Liu Kang’s paintings, yet what is referred to as ‘the colonial’ is mostly absent in Liu Kang’s paintings, yet what is referred to as ‘the colonial’. But what about that Singapore is telling its audience here? And who is this audience actually imagined to be? The post in postcolonial and the future to think of The Singapore example does not necessarily argue that the Museum should have done things differently. It is not altogether clear if this would be the case. In an alternative scenario Liu Kang is undoubtedly a tremendously accomplished and important painter whose work will stand the test of time and will continue to inspire. How does one come to terms with how both former colonizer and colonized deal with, understand, depict, portray, even envisage the past and so on. It actually brings us to the question of the post in postcolonial.
What is this post we keep talking about? It is what comes after the colonial, yet it also implies an undefined (endless?) period, in which the past, present and future are inseparably connected – a struggle to understand what (happened, what led us to come to here, what will we do now). It may even represent a struggle of struggles – of having to do something with ‘it’. Colonialism cannot (ever) simply be put to rest. The influence of colonialism, on both sides of the divide (colonizer vs. colonized), is always there, one way or the other, having shaped our present and influencing that what is yet to come.

Politics and business
Politically it often makes sense to contest colonial remnants simply for what they symbolize or, as is often the case, made to symbolize in current ‘daily life’. But the postcolonial often also simply means business. The romantic, slightly intellectual aura that continues to cling to the good old colonial days continues as a good money-maker. The colonial ‘style’ is more popular than ever before. A recent visit to Sri Lanka, for example, showed how much the colonial can be celebrated for its infinite imaginary qualities. Gin and tonics at Galle Face Hotel on Sunday afternoon, right before sundown, is something that not only attracts foreign visitors but many Sri Lankan couples as well (fig. 1 page 23). The old British guesthouses on route to ancient sites such as Anuradhapura, Sigiriya, and Pollonaruwa, have all been refurbished, brought back to their illustrious style of days long gone by, and generating a feeling of what it must have been like back then (fig. 5). It left a Sri Lankan friend to ponder openly that perhaps colonialism was not such a big deal for Sri Lanka… Whether or not this is actually so is not why it is worth reproducing this little scene here, on paper; a scene that was characterized by a fine Pekoe tea, served in beautifully decorated fine white porcelain cups, by an impeccably dressed waiter who seemed to have stepped straight off the set of a Merchant Ivory film. It is to draw our attention to the way the colonial – and whatever it is supposed to stand for – is continuously reproduced, often rather unproblematically, because it is what the ‘public’ wants and thus also what the ‘public’ is willing to pay for. When we talk about the postcolonial these are things we need to keep in mind; that, for the public, the colonial, what it represents, is supposed to stand for, often holds a difficult divide between admiration or romanticization – even imbued by a certain longing – and awareness of its incredibly painful dimensions and its ongoing, highly influential, yet problematic legacy.

This focus on postcolonialism
The following articles in this focus section on postcolonialism deal, each in their own way, with the meaning of colonial pasts in current contexts and debates, bringing to the fore new and interesting cases which hitherto have received no, or only marginal, attention. What is striking in their analyses is the continued relevance and importance of the colonial experience to the way the state, in a sense, reflects on itself, and uses and negotiates these experiences to fit a certain economic/political agenda. But the articles also raise awareness for colonial remnants (‘cultural heritage’) and their continued and shifting meaning to the inhabitants of formerly colonized countries. These articles do not pretend to have the final word on the direction postcolonial studies need to take, but they do provide an interesting insight not just into individual cases, but also into the changing nature of the study of postcolonialism itself. Increasingly, cultural heritage, colonial memories, state projects and transnational relations, shape postcolonial inquiries.

While Lung-chih Chang and Min-chyi Kay Chiang focus on Taiwanese postcolonial identity – explored through Japanese colonial heritage sites – the focus in Marieke Bloembergen and Martin Eckhoff’s article is very simply one object: an opulently carved teakwood room-screen, which was used in the early eighteenth century to furnish the Council Room of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in Batavia. In both cases it becomes clear that a detailed analysis of the shifting meaning that is attached to such heritage sites, or even just one object, can reveal a vast world of knowledge with regards to how people relate to and reflect on a certain colonial past and postcolonial present. Even more so, it unveils the changing dimensions of such relations and reflections bringing a certain dynamics to the postcolonial exploration that studies so far often seemed to lack.

Tharapri Than’s analysis of postcolonial Burma reveals how the country engaged in a project of Burmanization in order to ‘resurrect’ Burmese ‘lost culture’ and by doing so had to distinguish itself from what it considered foreign. While even foreign businesses participated in this project, clearly keeping business interests in mind, the goal of the project was to remove that what was considered not-Burmese and thus foreign. Thailand never ventured off into such a project, as it was so ‘very clearly’ never colonized. However, Rachel Harrison places some very apparent questions marks to this commonly held perception in her article. She refers to scholarly work that demonstrates the extent to which Siam was in fact, in several respects, semi-colonial. In addition, she also refers to work that has demonstrated how the assertion of control over peripheral areas of the Siamese state was even strategized towards the Bangkok elite by adopting aspects of colonial policy. Not only does Harrison argue that such power relations continue to manifest themselves in contemporary politico-cultural discourses of the urban elite over rural provinces, but that this also connects to recent political protests in Bangkok.

While a Thai colonial past reads like an oxymoron, China’s colonial past is an easily forgotten one in light of the country’s recent successes. Zheng Wang’s article, however, makes perfectly clear that the notion of time – and perhaps the very recent successes. Zheng Wang’s article, however, makes perfectly clear that the notion of time – and perhaps the very recent memories of economic success – healing all wounds, is unfortunately wrong. Wang argues that although China is certainly no longer the weak and isolated state it once was, the Chinese have not really moved forward from what he describes as ‘their past humiliation.’ He concludes in a way that would have befitted the 2011 roundtable on Postcolonial Dialogues: “What individuals and countries remember and what they choose to forget are telling indicators of their current values, perceptions, and even their aspirations.”

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