Modes of comparison for structures of modernity

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This usage of scientific vocabulary in an art historical study is not as objectionable as its potential ramifications for a project that attempts to problematize the standard narrative of progress as embodied in the traditional canon of modern art history. What makes Clark’s methodology and argument tendentious is the repeated usage of terms like “other modernity,” endogenous/exogenous, two-way “othering” process, hybridity, evolutionary theory, amongst others. “By admittedly very distant analogy we could interpret modernity as a kind of species adaptation to a situation of a rapid and widely distributed series of relativisations. The question arises as to whether these are to be necessarily seen as adaptive traits of a species-like set of cultural forms, or some initial set of conditions for modernity which then takes specific developmental routes within different cultures” (23). Unfortunately, the reiteration of these terms throughout the text only serves to reinforce the sense that what we are grappling with is another study emphasizing a linear developmental model of modernity, which further concretizes the opposition between the West and the rest. The overuse of such dichotomous categories is detrimental to Clark’s objective of attempting to render the term “modernity” more open and inclusive, this being the chief objective of his text. At this point, studies of comparative modernities have come quite far, and it is now generally understood that modernity is often the result of an encounter with an “other” (especially in artistic modernism), and is inherently a “hybrid” phenomenon to begin with. It is a shame that the work’s exploration of the semiotic and scientific vernacular takes away from the compelling nature of the stories, history, and visual material with which Clark can only briefly engage.

However, one can attribute this cursory engagement and the lack, or near absence, of artists’ voices in Clark’s account to his chief preoccupation with institutional structures and how they shape artistic change as it is entangled with discourses of modernity and progress. As Clark openly states, “Structures and institutions will be our concern here and not binding narratives of artistic developments, although these will be included where they facilitate illustration. Our theoretical and empirical research will certainly show that the processes underlying the geographical and cultural field of the two Asian countries examined” (43). Moreover, his focus on institutions and how they shape artistic communities and fluxes of discourse is highly pertinent when it comes to the imaging of nation and state, and the particular worldviews – in this case, highly disparate cultural perspectives from China and Thailand – that are informed by these engagements through artistic expression. Here Clark argues for a compelling point of contrast between the two countries and the embeddedness of historical or cultural consciousness in shaping their respective art histories: “Above and beyond the state organs that actually secured hermeneutic hegemony, the basic resemblance between China and Thailand was the presumption of a set of values defining the state and nation” (251).

Clark does make a compelling argument for understanding the distinctive differences between Chinese and Southeast Asian worldviews in terms of state-cultural models and how these shape the changing concept of the nation. Artistic production in China has always been imbued in discourses tied to ideological and political conditions, with artists highly engaged in evoking an inalienable sense of historical consciousness. A key theme in these discourses was the China/West divide, which would appear to have resulted in more concerted efforts to establish distinctive artistic styles to represent China at global exhibitions and events, the most recognizable style likely being political pop or what Clark refers to as “a ‘cryptic pop maniera’” (233). On the other hand, Thailand’s historical socio-political trajectory as a semi-feudal, semi-colonial state until the mid-twentieth century resulted in a very different set of cultural and historical discourses compared to China, especially as it concerns the development of a more fraught and ambivalent. The mutually-implicated trio of state, king, and Buddhism has governed a set of universal values in Thailand that also manifested itself in artistic production, with less of a drive for Thai artists to assert themselves in the global arena of contemporary art: “the distinguishing feature of many Thai artists was their lack of concern with the artistic conquest of the world or even much overseas recognition. Thisartistsimply did not have the historically intense wish for acceptance by the West seen in China” (139).

The great contribution of Clark’s text is the degree to which he attempts to investigate the various interfaces between institutional artistic formation and the multiple sources of what he terms ‘exogenous’ or external influence in the late twentieth century, a period that can generally be understood as the era of globalization in the contemporary period. He maintains throughout the book that “The distinguishing feature of Chinese and Thai modernity was that the propagation of styles was reinforced by what were in different ways highly controlled and motivational social institutions found in art curricula, art schools and art competitions” (168); this is certainly not a phenomena found throughout contemporary art in Asia, especially elsewhere in Southeast Asia. At the same time, these institutionally-driven artistic styles and movements are rendered problematic by the blurring of categories amongst non-affiliating and differently-sourced histories, as in the activities and affiliations of artist-critics, curators, and writers) in both countries. This emphasis on the role of institutional formation, whether it shaped ideas and practices in the spirit of or against the academic and the official, makes his study an important contribution to studies of Asian modern art history, and highlights his project of distinguishing trajectories of modernity (in this case, into the period of the contemporary given his focus on the late twentieth century) in situations disparate from the now-standardized Euro-American narratives. In addition, his book is valuable for its detailed and empirical case studies, which will be useful for those interested in undertaking research into modern and contemporary Asian art with the goal of problematizing the notion of an Asian modernity or modernism. Such studies are necessary in order to bring into further relief the extent to which artistic developments and practices throughout the region are highly variegated and complex, thus enriching our understandings of the modern processes of globalization and contemporaneity, and the formation of global artistic networks.

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