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‘Towards a transnational design history in East Asia’ (Introduction)

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論文
Articles

1. Anglo-American Centrism and the issue of ‘Globalisation’ in Design History Studies

Before we start the main presentations of case studies for today’s symposium, as an initiator of this symposium, I would like to talk a bit about why ‘East Asia’ now and what’s so important about it. Four years ago, we (Yunah Lee, Wessie Ling and Kikuchi), as design historians based in the UK, launched an international joint project ‘Oriental Modernity: Modern Design Development in East Asia, 1920-1990’. As you may know, the field of ‘Design History’ was newly created for the higher education curriculum in the 1970s in parallel with the existing ‘Art History’. Following that, the Design History Society (DHS) was founded in 1977, and the Journal of Design History started its publication from the Oxford University Press in 1988. Since then, it has accumulated a large body of design history studies from the Euroamerican world with topics ranging from the 19th century English Arts & Crafts movement, the Great Exhibitions and the histories of international exhibitions and the Bauhaus, right through to the development in the USA. However, after 45 years since the foundation of the DHS, we are facing a turning point. According to the statistics of 2004, the dominant subscribers of the JDH reside in

the UK (80%) and in the USA (10%) totaling 90% who are Angloamericans. However, in 2011, the percentage of subscribers in the UK fell to 8%, and despite the slight increase in the proportion of US subscribers to 18%, the percentage of Anglo-American subscriptions went down radically to 26% in total. On the other hand, subscription in Japan suddenly went up to 4%, and subscriptions in the European continent and Latin American also went up in terms of the proportion of the subscriptions.[1] In the context of these shifts, the topic on 'globalisation' has been much debated in Art and Design History in the Angloamerica. Two recent publications: *Is Art History Global?* (2007) edited by James Elkins (Fig. 1); and *Global Design History* (2011) edited by Glenn Adamson, Giorgio Riello and Sarah Teasley are exemplify the current debate. (Fig. 2) These two books explore the idea around what is the 'global' framework, who is this for, and what kind of methodologies are possible, thus attempting to criticize the Anglo-American centrism from within Angloamerica.

2. The Development of Design History Studies in East Asia

There has been some a remarkable development in Design History Studies outside Anglo-America as well, in particular in East Asia. Japan has already accumulated over fifty years of studies. Research on Euroamerican design history and Modern Japanese design history after the Meiji Restoration by Japanese scholars have made a profound contribution to design history studies. Since I was appointed an Editorial Board member of the Journal of Design History as the first member with an Asian background, one of the key projects I have initiated



Fig. 1 James Elkins, *Is Art History Global*. New York; London: Routledge, 2007.

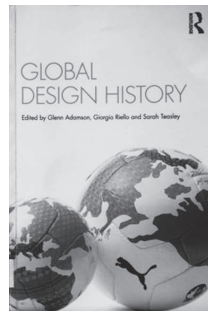


Fig. 2 Glenn Adamson, Giorgio Riello and Sarah Teasley eds., *Global Design History*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011.

was a 'Re: focus design—Design Histories and Design Studies in East Asia' series. (Fig. 3) This three part series introduced the current situations of Design History and Design Studies in East Asia with Part I on Japan, Part II on PRC, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and Part III on Korea. As you can notice in this comparison, Taiwan and Hong Kong have developed in a similar way as in Japan, while Korea has been catching up at a very fast pace. On the other hand, while the PRC has produced some concentrated studies on the Republican period, its coverage generally presents as uneven and is somewhat affected by the political instability and cultural chaos of the times. It also appears to be difficult for the PRC to engage with other East Asian countries' approaches to design history and design studies.

However, you will quickly notice that modern design histories in East Asia are inter-connected as is exemplified in the fact that the European design terminologies were translated into East Asian languages via Japanese translation. Up to now, there has been a lack of this perspective of East Asia in Japanese design history studies. However, recently we have observed the emergence of studies in which the scope is East Asia but are characterized by the way they look at East Asia from Japan's perspective, in particular through the studies on Japanese colonies and Japanese empire. This exhibition 'Japanese Crossing Borders: Asia as Dreamed by Craftspeople, 1910s–1945' is of this type. However, in general, due to unresolved political and diplomatic sensitivities problems over Japanese invasions and colonisation, as well as language barriers, these studies have not been developing fast. We still don't know much about what kinds of movements in art, craft

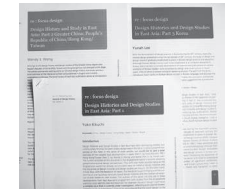


Fig. 3 're: focus design—Design Histories and Design Studies in East Asia', Part 1-Introduction and Japan by Yuko Kikuchi, *Journal of Design History*, 24(3): 273–282, 2011; Part 2-Greater China: People's Republic of China/Hong Kong/Taiwan by Wendy S. Wong, 24(4): 375–395, 2011; Part 3: Korea by Yunah Lee and Conclusion by Kikuchi, 25(1): 93–106.

and design developed, who was involved in facilitating these movements in a transnational environment within the Japanese empire in the early 20th century. We only vaguely know now that there were vibrant design exchanges which shared in East Asian modernity and creativity in Japan, Shanghai and Hong Kong before the Second World War. Therefore, it is vital that we develop a network of design historians in East Asia, help each other to overcome political and linguistic difficulties, and promote the idea of inter-East Asian design histories. We need to accumulate empirical case studies, but at the same time we need to engage with critical discussions that have developed in Anglo-American design history studies. For example, the characteristics of 'modernity', nationalism and identity, and 'craft' as an ambiguously situated practice that is rooted in the everyday realities of East Asian visual culture, are some of the key issues that would offer comparison of commonalities and differences between East Asia and Anglo-America, but also within East Asia. By presenting case studies of East Asia as well as critically engaging from an East Asian perspective, we are able to contribute to and reshape the Anglo-American centric design history studies. We would like to deliver this message throughout our presentations today. Our aim is to develop a network of design historians in order to build a transnational design history studies in East Asia. If you are interested, please join us in the workshops, symposia, blogs and digital archive which we're developing.

Note

[1] Jonathan M. Woodham, 'Local, National and Global: Redrawing the Design Historical Map', *Journal of Design History* 18-3 (2005), 257-267; Oxford University Press, *Journal of Design History: Publisher's Report*, June 2011.