Kohei Sugiura and Kirti Trivedi: capturing Asia as transnational in four dimensions

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Abstract

Sugiura Kohei, a leading Japanese graphic designer, describes in his book, *Nihon no Katachi, Asia no Katachi*, his experience of overlapping a decorative pattern he saw at a temple of Tibet Buddhism in Bhutan with a picture of a kite he was looking at in a catalogue. He has been interested in the multilayered symbolism found in the Asian countries, and has introduced to the Japanese audience the Asian traditional culture through innovative exhibitions and exhibition catalogues.

At the same time, Sugiura has been active in India since 1981. He was first invited to the Industrial Design Centre (IDC), Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Mumbai under the aegis of UNESCO's Development Programme as a Visual Communications expert to advise on design pedagogy. He delivered lectures and workshops in 1981 and 1983. Kirti Trivedi, a design tutor at IIT visited Sugiura in Japan as a UNESCO Fellow in 1981 and returned to Mumbai with plans to further the Visual Communications Programme.

More than three decades on, Trivedi and Sugiura continue to collaborate, forming a pan-Asian creative alliance. Both designers reflect on their own traditional art forms and produce a narrative of similarities, of deep-rooted and established historic links that formulate an 'Asian' present. The paper explores this contemporary pan-Asianism in action based upon the two local traditional design cultures globally connected.

Sugiura Kohei; Kirti Trivedi; pan-Asianism; design education

Sugiura Kohei, a renowned graphic designer born in 1932, describes in his book, *Nihon no Katachi, Asia no Katachi* (Japanese Forms, Asian Forms, 1994), his experience of overlapping a decorative pattern he saw at a temple of Tibet Buddhism in Bhutan with a picture of a kite he was looking at in a catalogue. It was a shocking discovery to him to find such similarity in them beyond geographical borders (Sugiura: 1994, 194). Since then, he has been even more interested in the multilayered symbolism found in the Asian countries,

and has introduced to the Japanese audience the Asian traditional culture through various media including innovative exhibitions.

This paper focuses on how Sugiura nurtured his enthusiasm for Asian design, and how he has understood and made sense of the characteristics of Asian design. Also, he has built practical relations with Asia through his educational activities, in particular with Kirti Triveti in India since the 1980s to the present day. Trivedi and Sugiura's collaboration highlights a long-term shared commitment to develop design thinking that is distinctly Asian. The spirit of pan-Asianism within artistic and design production, as well as education has a long tradition dating back to the early twentieth century. The underpinning political agendas, however, have changed over time, reflecting Asia's relationship with the West. The paper argues that their collaboration can be viewed as a step to deconstruct the past pan-Asianism represented by Kakuzo Okakura, to de-centralise the discussion of Japan's 'oriental orientalism' and 'self orientalism' in the post-war period, and to find a way of understanding Asia as synchronic as well as diachronic accumulation of transnational and translocal cultures.

Asian Awakening at Ulm School of Design

Sugiura is notable in that while most contemporary Japanese leaders in most of the fields including academics and artists looked to either Europe or America for models rather than looking into Asia itself, he was quite early in realizing its significance. But he also looked to Europe once. In fact, the beginning of his awakening to Asia was his experience of design education at then the most innovative centre of modern design education, the Ulm School of Design in West Germany, from 1964 to 1967. He was naturally astonished to learn all the brand-new approaches to discuss design, such as cybernetics, semantics and information theory, as he felt the rest of the world was living almost 10 to 20 years behind Ulm School in design theories and education.

But this did not lead him simply to admire and blindly follow the European movement. There he was faced with a very different logic. To him, everything in Germany had to be answered in either a yes or no, and there was no possibility of in-betweenness. He was puzzled as he believed that things cannot be so clearly divided as the Western patterns of argument forced him to. During his stay in Germany he even got the nickname, 'PERHAPS', because people thought he always avoided seeing things in either black or white. Avoiding clear-cut logical decisions came from his belief that 'it is the easiest thing to say either yes or no, as life is much deeper' (Sugiura, 2010: 256-259). And this made him reconsider the contemporary society in which the Western ways of logical thinking prevailed. He talked on the Western-Asian differences endlessly with some other designers from Asian countries also studying there. This was his very first material relationship built upon Asian-ness.

Having deeply felt the fundamental difference between Europe and Asia at the Ulm School, he returned to Japan. He soon began to expand his practical relations with Asia, through

receiving students from India and Korea. They were students of trainee designers he had made very good friends with at the Ulm School where they had studied and discussed ideas together.

His next definite move was to travel across Asia. He visited India for the first time in 1972, and was completely taken away with the richness of its visual culture. Significantly, he has always been conscious that by going to India he would deepen the understanding of Japan as well as India. He began energetically producing books and holding exhibitions on the pan-Asian design history based on his experience and research. For example, he published *Asian Cosmos and Mandala,* in the 1980s and also organized an exhibition with the same title (Sugiura, 1982). The exhibition's main significance was to reunite the esoteric Buddhist teachings born in India, and now surviving in Tibetan cultural spheres and Japan after one thousand years. Here he began his journey of inquiry from India's 'Gusharon (abhidharma Storehouse Treatise)', his goal was Mt. Fuji in Japan, and the road of the journey was the geographical process of idealization of Mount Meru (considered in Buddhism as the mountain located at the centre of the world) prevalent in Asia. The exhibition was composed of two parts: Cosmos and Mandala (Figure 1). Cosmos represented the vertical image of Asian space, and Mandala represented the horizontal image, and where the two axes meet, the whole three-dimensional image of the Asian space was to emerge. From here, Sugiura deductively explains why the Japanese have an almost religious feeling towards Mt. Fuji: the idea of Asian Cosmos has partly flown into the Japanese mentality via China, Thailand and other Asian countries over time, and has formed this deep-rooted feeling towards the highest mountain in the country.

Asia as the World of 'Multiple Subjects' and 'Anonymity'

One of his significant findings about Asia is that he regards it as the world of 'multiple subjects'. In the Western discourse, the subject is decisive and grammatically secures its place at the beginning of the sentence. However, in Japanese this is not so and he feels that when he talks about something he is not just simply referring to 'I' as the only subject, but to everything in the world vaguely connected with himself, even including numerous things that had existed before him in the past (Sugiura, 2010, 268). The idea that everything links and forms a network, and that every knot of the network is the subject, and such networks overlaps with one another….This is the opposite way of understanding the world where always 'I' stands out like in the Western countries. Since its re-opening to the world in the Meiji Era, Japan has imported this 'I'-centered system as a part of modernization and rationalization, but Sugiura has come to criticize it as the 'destructive Westernism' (Sugiura, 2010, 269).

Another concept that characterizes Sugiura's view on Asia is 'anonymity'. Most of the forms or representations seen in the visual material are created by anonymous people. Great forms and decorations attached to festival cars, for example, are the mixture of people's pious prayers and their belief in life. All the anonymous shapes and representations are being used

in the traditional things and ceremonious goods for centuries. Here, Suigura asks 'why' anonymity has never bothered Asia as far as decorative motifs are concerned. He has come up with one possible reason that, 'these forms have been made by the anonymous people from the past to the present, who lived and died and reincarnate anonymously. The forms have been created by the hands of all these people, and by their hearts'. And another possible reason is that 'these forms are not the fine art objects simply for decoration. These consist of people's prayers for peaceful lives and rich harvests, and therefore these forms have spirits' (Sugiura, 1994: 154). All the motifs lead to the representation of natural power of living creatures: the tree of life, the arabesque, the swirling motifs, etc. These forms are 'beyond individuality' and 'beyond self'(ibid). This, like the idea of 'multiple subjects', is opposite to the Western idea of individual expressiveness or originality in visual culture.

Sugiura's idea of Asia with 'multiple subjects' and 'anonymity' rejects any fixed centralization in Asia. That is why neither oriental-orientalism nor self-orientalism applies to his ideas. And it has led him to be open to the diversity of Asian design, which he has experienced in India at first hand.

Sugiura and India

Sugiura's fascination and interest in Asian culture and design is evident in his collaboration with Kirti Trivedi, Professor of Design at the Industrial Design Centre, India Institute of Technology (IIT) in Mumbai, India. This collaboration took seed in 1981 when Sugiura was invited to form part of an expert consultation team at IIT facilitated by UNESCO and funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The objective of this UN project was 'to improve the quality of industrial design through the improved training of designers'(*Industrial Design Centre, India Institute of Technology (IIT),* 1985: 2). This could be achieved by 'strengthening on-going courses' and by 'expanding and diversifying the existing training courses of the Industrial Design Centre, to meet and enable it to meet the industrial design needs of both public and private sectors' (ibid). The existing curriculum had focussed on industrial production and communication. The expansion of the curriculum involved the inclusion of specialist design training such as furniture and leather goods design, as well as visual communication (ibid). Providing consultancy services and staff training were two of the main implementation strategies, both of which Sugiura contributed to. IDC had been established in 1968 by the Indian Government's Ministry of Education. Its purpose was to enable the study of environmental design problems in industrial production and communication. The need to expand training facilities in industrial design and visual communication was subsequently identified in the late-1970s. This expansion was seen as a crucial aspect of industrial development by UNESCO and UNDP.

The ideology underpinning this development linked Indian tradition with technical modernity and Sugiura was identified as one of the eighteen experts to be invited to provide consultancy on this project. Sugiura's work echoed this projected ideological position in the mission statement. Since the 1960s, he was concerned with traditional forms of design from

Japan, China and India, adapted for modern forms of visual communication (books, magazines, posters). He visited IDC in 1981 and 1983, delivered lectures on 'Process of Development in Drawing' and 'Unique Examples of Japanese Picture Books for Children', which were accompanied by displays of Japanese children's books. He conducted a seminar 'Designing for Children', workshops on publishing for children and one on 'Paper as a Microcosmos', which also included a demonstration of origami (ibid, 29). These activities with IDC staff and students highlight his contribution to Visual Communication at the institution during these years, which has left a legacy in design thinking. His distinct emphasis on Japanese design introduced his Indian design audience to considering non-Western practices of visual communication. Similar to Sugiura, IIT's senior academic and founder of IDC Sudhakar Nadkarni studied at the Ulm School between 1962-66. Ulm philosophy had formed the basis for education in the early days at the IDC, but this changed in the early 1980s when design research and pedagogy at the Institute increasingly looked to Indian forms and design traditions for inspiration.

Between March and December 1981, Trivedi undertook the UNESCO Fellowship under the mentorship of Sugiura. He visited his Design office in Tokyo, as well as museums, art galleries and universities. He also visited Hong Kong and Seoul on this trip and observed Product Design and Design Education in the two cities. The Fellowship resulted in one key recommendation: that the curriculum at IDC provide a 'complete design approach' and 'disciplines of Environmental Design, as well as inputs in Cultural Anthropology, Bio-Sciences, Management and Behavioural Sciences should be added' (ibid, 54). This step towards diversifying the curriculum from Product Design highlights Trivedi's input in the development of design pedagogy in India, formulated through site visits and his collaboration with Sugiura. The UNESCO/UNDP development project's outcomes included changes in curriculum, commencement of research projects in design solutions, launching publications, employing new staff, forging industry links and purchasing technological resources. All of these were formulated through links with national and international experts in design. Responding to Indian design problems by considering Indian design traditions and modern technologies did form the design ethos at IDC during these years. Examples of research and pedagogic projects during the early 1980s include: studies of Indian product design tradition; the Devanagari typeface design and development of a bicycle for rural transportation. The shared ideology and approach to design, however, linked Trivedi and Sugiura beyond the UNESCO project. It was during these years of collaboration that each studied design through the lens of cultural practices and histories – both their own and the other's. While the purpose of this collaboration for Trivedi was primarily driven by the agendas set by IDC's stakeholders: the funder, the Indian Government and the academy, these meetings would formulate the idea of 'Asian' design for him. Sugiura had a profound influence on Trivedi's thinking on Asian design: its shared philosophies, visual symbolism and design forms.

Sugiura and Trivedi's collaboration in recent years shows a maturing of their shared interest in Asian design. Trivedi planned and organized the exhibition *The Way of Asian Design* for the Singapore Design Festival 2007 (Figure 2). Singapore, for Sugiura is a 'multinational city state', a melting pot of Asian culture: Chinese, Indian, Malay, Islamic, Indian and western, and was the appropriate location for this exhibition, which showcased his books and magazines (Trivedi, 2015: 23) The philosophy he cites in relation to this body of work 'two in one, one in two' alludes to Yin and Yang's polarized opposites and their unification (ibid). It is this philosophy, he argues, is where Asian cultures overlap. He sees the form of the book as a medium that can draw upon this principle, formulating a distinct, non-western form of design. Similarly, Trivedi sees concept-driven Asian design as the future of modern design, particularly, in the digital sphere, 'revitalizing it and giving it a much needed depth' (Trivedi, 2007: 171). He adds that in the western design tradition, the object evolves from an exploration of the physical, the material possibilities and its function. Whereas in the eastern tradition, this is driven by ideas and form is given to a concept (ibid). Trivedi hosted another exhibition of Sugiura's work at the Tao Art Gallery in Mumbai in 2015 titled *Kohei Sugiura: Graphic Design Methodology and Philosophy,* highlighting Sugiura's return to India and long-standing relationship with Trivedi.

Collaboration: Institutionalizing Asian Art and Design

The collaboration between the designers has impacted on thinking in design pedagogy in recent years. Sugiura established the Research Institute of Asian Design at Kobe Design University, Japan. The institute 'aims to rediscover vital formative arts in Asia, where rich and traditional cultures, which are different from Western culture, are still rooted in daily life, and to establish "Asian Design" based on its unique usage'. They maintain that '(T)hrough research on such projects as "Asian headgear," "Asian plants and trees," "Asian spirals" as well as the already launched study on "Asian floats," we will reaffirm the values and meaning of the vast number of formative arts embraced by Asian cultures to use them in modern art'(Kobe Design University Research Institute of Asian Design) . Supported by Sugiura's enthusiasm on the subject it has held a number of significant events and published the outcome of the discussions that took place there, covering as wide a topic as Asian symbols (birds and snakes), Asian festival cars, the tree of life symbols, Asian traditional ceremonies, architectural columns in Asian culture and crowns in Asia.

In India, Trivedi introduced modules such as *Indian Design Tradition* and *Indian Thoughts and Traditions* to the IDC curriculum and helped establish the Centre for Asian Art & Design at the School of Art, Design and Media at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore in 2011. He calls for a rethink of design education, where a 'preoccupation with physical and the superficial; and the structured, curriculum-based, fragmented teaching…are just too constraining for any real learning and understanding to occur'(ibid, 177). He proclaims:

A New School of Asian Design in required: a place where one would learn by living with the Masters and the Monks, the Philosophers and the Practitioners, the Planners and the Programmers. It will be a community where the ancient wisdom and the future possibilities will co-exist, in an atmosphere of creative excellence (ibid).

This vision of a new design school shows its rootedness in an identity that, for Trivedi, in the 1980s was Indian (in his quest for a suitable Indian design education) but has translated to one that is pan-Asian. This expansion of a meta-geography shows an ongoing search for new ways of teaching design.

Grasping Pan-Asian Visual Culture in Four Dimensions

Sugiura's interest in Asian tradition and design should be read within the context of Japan's longstanding relationship with Asia (particularly, India) and the West. Indian and Japanese cultural collaboration dates to the early twentieth century, amid the escalation of anti-imperialist sentiment and the rise in *swadeshi* ideology (indigenous-ness) in India. Several Indian cultural figures such as Rabindranath Tagore, artist and poet, and philosopher Swami Vivekananda had close links with Japanese art critic and educationist Okakura Kakuzo Tenshin. The Tagores and Tenshin shared the same political views on Western art education, which had been introduced in British India as well as in Japan during the Meiji Period. They both saw it as devoid of the spiritual, as materialist and commercial, that had trampled upon Indian and Japanese forms of art (Mitter, 1994, 262-3). This formed the basis of a new pan-Asian identity, rooted in anti-imperial and nationalist politics. Asia was posited by both: the European imperial powers and the Asian thinkers, as the opposite of the materialist West. For the Europeans, this meant non-rational and an emotional Asia. For the Asians, the polar opposite of the rational West meant a spiritual Asia. A revisiting and re-envisioning of design education with Asian spirituality at its core, formed a key part of the anti-Western position assumed by the Tagores and Tenshin.

These civilizational differences and a process of self-orientalization have continued to be formulated by our designers Trivedi and Sugiura, highlighting an ongoing interest in a pan-Asian identity. And yet, their pan-Asian value is something beyond Okakura's assertion of 'Asia as one' in the pre-war years or oriental-orientalist view of 'Japan in but above Asia' of the post-war years. Instead of putting Japan at the centre of Asia, like Japan as responsible for or entitled to establishing 'a museum of Asiatic civilization' (Okakura) because it has never been invaded from foreign nations, Sugiura's emphasis is on the 'lineage' of historical, material and cultural communication accumulated in and around Asia.

This roughly coincided with the emergence of Asianism in Japan in the 1990s that aligns with an attention to Asian markets, against a backdrop of other regional formations: the European Union and the North American Free Trade Agreement. The process of globalization and a recognition of a modernizing Asia, Koicki Iwabuchi has argued, has led

Japan to enter a transnational relationship with a new Asia, no longer backward, highlighted by the 1990s slogan '*Datsuō nyūa*', 'Escape the West, enter Asia' (Iwabuchi, 2002: 14).

Likewise, India's increasing outreach to Asian markets and in particular, strategic partnership with Japan since 2009, indicates diplomatic agreements fostered by both nation states (Mancheri, 2005). The formation of transnational relationships at the behest of economic and cultural relations, certainly have repercussions in design advocacy and policy. The vision for design pedagogy, as imagined by Trivedi, proposes a balancing act between 'Indian' 'Asian' and 'Western' values, in order to design a new way of teaching design in a global world within Asia, and thus avoiding the danger of falling into the simple 'brand nationalism'.

Conclusion

In the 21st century, Sugiura's attempt is beyond imperial nostalgia, just as Trivedi's is beyond brand nationalism. Sugiura researches diachronic histories of visual symbols. His synchronic collaboration with Trivedi are intellectual and practical attempts to liaise Asian localities beyond boundaries and to recall and reactivate an Asian mentality in modern design. Helped by his collaboration with Trivedi, his argument that 'time' and 'past' are together with the present visual culture, could be described as transnationality of Asia in four dimensions. The two institutions in Japan and India, dedicated to this Asian transnationalism and their practice of looking at the past as well as the future, means they will never be static 'museums' in Okakura's sense. Instead, they provide concrete milestones towards understanding Asia as synchronic as well as diachronic accumulation of transnational and translocal cultures.

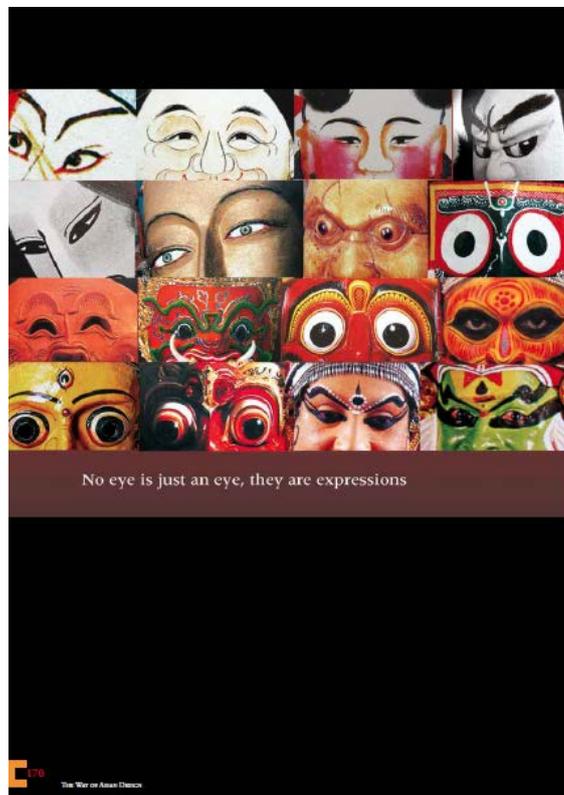Figure 1: Leaflet of the exhibition organized by Sugiura

Figure 2: Page from exhibition catalogue *Asian Design* showing representations of facial expressions in performance art in Asia

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