

## REVIEWS

One of the symptoms which reveals the questionable effectiveness of Western methods for analysing the artistic and cultural expression of so-called 'periphery' areas (with particular reference to Asian countries), is the scant attention paid to the inevitable tension between tradition and modernity, as the Korean scholar Oh Kwang-su pointed out in the Kwangju Biennial.

In most Asian countries, modernisation has been carried out by means of complex processes which have generally aimed to safeguard traditional culture. Although such a principle is not unique to this part of the world, there is undoubtedly a distinct homogeneity in the ways of thinking of the different Asian countries, which conditions their lifestyle, art and culture. Since this is evident particularly in Buddhism, Islam and Confucianism, any study of events in these areas must be carefully focused.

Summarising Oh Kwang-su's comments, we could say that the very rapid process of modernisation in these countries (in terms of industrialisation and urbanisation), has caused a considerable "trauma" in their vital development. The concentration of the population in urban areas is a major factor leading to the rapid disintegration of rural communities, which has in turn adversely affected the importance of agriculture. Moreover, this "progress" has had very negative effects on cultural and spiritual value systems; the incoherent material development has

# Eastern Spirituality. Syndrome of Difference

*resulted in numerous expressions of crisis.*

A further consequence has been the insistent (and sometimes extreme) return to tradition which, in my opinion, is not always simply a regression or refuge in the past; it is a necessary way of dealing with crisis. It goes without saying that in the countries where modernisation has been synonymous with Westernization, the very essence of spiritual culture has been manipulated and considered a convention; an unchangeable, timeworn cliché. On the other hand, the East has often been defined as a paradise, untouched since the Middle Ages and acting as a counterpoint to ideological crises in the West. The East, therefore, is the most recurrent image used by Europe to define itself.

Although extremes are obviously inappropriate examples to defend or

explain any argument, they do fuel the intense debate and the desire to bring order to the chaos of an apparently Byzantine debate between "North" and "South". For this reason I would like to point out the dangers implicit in analysing beauty in Asian symbolic expression solely from a Western Classical-Christian point of view which, worse still, uses European-American examples as comparative criteria. As the Thai critic Apinan Poshyananda points out, this kind of critical analysis is inevitably unreliable and highly controversial. The point is that in the so-called East, knowledge is based on immediate experience; knowledge is, therefore, the search for ultimate truth. Hence, we all belong to the same aesthetic continuum, which is nature: a continuum which is interpreted as the link between mankind and nature, the relationship between all things, the inextricable link between all phenomena. It is aesthetic because it is unpredictable; impossible to transmit because it is immediate, and has been learnt in an immediate way. Consequently, it can not be used to prove that one thing is superior to another. In short, aesthetic expression is synonymous with the inexpressible; art is the instrument, borne of the search for ultimate truth. Therein lies our understanding of the existence of multiple perspectives in works of art.

It is well worth drawing attention to the anthropological definition which includes and legitimises every material and spiritual product of mankind

regardless of their level of development, and stresses that all cultures function in accordance with their existence. Otherwise, despite centuries of “enlightenment”, we will continue to apply the age-old definition of “savages”, used by the Greeks to refer to those who did not participate in their culture; only with great reticence is this idea gradually changing. Nowadays we can not help but question the adoption of a system of values which was once considered unique (partly due to the absence of alternative systems, but generally because of their contempt for traditional systems in areas like Asia, which were such a prominent part of their culture), in terms of the traumas it has created, rather than for the light it brings to debates and definitions in this matter.

Colonisation imposed a model which was not easy to swallow. As we can see in the exhibition catalogue “Contemporary Art in Non-Aligned Countries”, the search for national identity in art during the colonial era was closely linked to the anti-colonial movements; this led to that East-West dichotomy which, in my opinion, still casts a ghostly shadow over the post-colonial period. It even influences the “positive” areas of hybridisation resulting from “contamination” and ethnic and cultural cross-breeding.

At this point it would be interesting to draw parallels with the people of African origin who are not fully integrated in the “pot-pourri” of Cuban culture, as studied by the Cuban ethnologist and scholar Fernando Ortiz, and since used by the critic Gerardo

Mosquera. Likewise, in Asian countries many components of society were not totally integrated or absorbed, and therefore remained outside what was “acceptably civilised” in the established systems of critical appreciation and evaluation. They were categorised simplistically as pre-logical ‘others’. Tradition is, therefore, inextricably linked to ethnic and indigenous roots; it goes far beyond the concept of modernity.

Right from the beginning of the modern movement, tradition was seen in the North as an obstacle; something which had to make way for progress. However, in the South, development has always been considered in terms of its integration with tradition, since tradition itself can embody an evolutionary process, undergoing changes and readjustments, without signifying an end to future development.

And in this process, traditions, myths and rituals are all an integral part of reality; they keep nature and spirit alive. Therefore, as we have seen, their use in contemporary art is not a mere pastiche or an affirmation of being different; it is simply the expression of essential elements in cultural behavior.

As Apinan Poshyananda has pointed out, Western culture has frequently used its ability to generate knowledge and institutional power over different cultures which it has termed “others”. In doing so, it has created stereotypes which, in terms of Asian countries, have gone no further than their interpretation of the eternal, mystical, exotic nature of things.

The Thai critic believes that such

ideas are the result of political fiction; a mystical idea of the “East” based on the “West’s” projection of its own fears. Precisely because of this, he adds, we must be wary of the West’s ‘self-easternizing’ fashion, and the reconstruction of personal identities using the stereotypical expectations of others. He also draws attention to the danger of campaigns designed to promote the idea of Asian homogeneity; idealized harmony to be achieved at any cost.

That is, the danger of “creating” pre-packed nationalisms, and the rise of ‘centerless’ centers, as opposed to the classification of ‘periphery’ and copying the West. This is also the problem with exhibitions and events which, like “easily-digestible fast-food”, attempt to show an ideal uniformity and homogeneity among nations or regions.

While the debate remains trapped in the notions of “us” and “them”, in the overriding shadow of statically preserved national pasts, opposed to modernity, then conceptual structures will also tend towards the proclamation of traditional regionalism, which is equally exotic and built on false pretensions.

The opposite extreme would clearly entail an irreversible eradication of the most vital aspects of a culture whose own particular profile, albeit not purist, is recognized and valued within the process of cross-culturalism.

Interestingly, many critics assert that although the world is apparently getting smaller, due to internationalization and the so-called global culture, we are in fact witnessing

a cultural fragmentation based on regionalism and ethnic separatism. Or, to put it another way, we have come face to face with the balkanization which is inevitably linked to the desired process of global change. The point is that globalization continues to happen from and for the centers. "Universal" culture still comes from central budgets and emerges from centralized systems.

Another problem of the established methods of criticism is the use of a classification system which attempts to categorize the symbolic production of these countries into different periods, in just the same way as we refer to the well-established, "classical" European styles. However, the classification of different "schools" is based on historic or socio-economic periods which have nothing to do with the local cultural history of these Asian areas. The specific details of their own particular circumstances are bound to influence any attempt to impose the methods of classification which are valid for other societies.

The same goes for the time-worn concept of the East or Asia or Asianness, which is used in a simplistic attempt to summarize and concentrate a huge, diverse and very complex continent into a single idea, despite the recognition of common, invariable characteristics, as we saw earlier. Undoubtedly, the term 'Eastern' has often been used to emphasize a sense of difference; supposedly also implying inferiority.

As is the case in all continents, Asian countries each have different levels of development, and have each undergone the processes of development

in different ways. There has been, for example, very rapid progress in the south eastern countries; we should bear in mind here the importance of the urban centers. This intense development has earned them the name "tigers of Asia"; such a "distinctive" classification also conceals a certain ambiguity.

Finally, the possibility of gaining access to modernity (not in the sense of Westernization, but of progress) is more than a right; it is a necessity. However, it requires a certain amount of coherence which should not imply more pillaging, or a new way of applying hegemonic strategies (which, unfortunately, still exist today).

To all this we should add that in these regions, new processes are being started while previous ones are still not complete, and ruptures have become endemic. As the Paraguayan expert Ticio Escobar has said, "... we still haven't quite become modern - after making such a huge effort - and, already, we are supposed to be post-modern". He stresses that "... modern culture aims to homogenize the symbols of the entire planet in the single mold of its own desire". (1) It could be said that we are trying to take on the idea of global culture without yet having surpassed or transgressed the limits of post-colonialism's controversial processes.

It is therefore easy to understand the introductory comments of the "Exhibition of Contemporary Art of the Non-Aligned Countries" which state that "...Construction has also been Deconstruction...", and that "...

ecological disaster, alienation and the weakening of values brought about by the uniformity of globalization, are all alarmingly negative effects of progress and modernization..." (2).

Of course now it would be foolish to attempt to halt the processes of hybridization and cross-culturation, or the interaction between different forms of practice. All this inevitably offers a new focus for discourse as well as changes in the sense of belonging to different cultural substrata, the chance to take part in a widespread debate with widespread answers, and a shake-up of the socio-political and artistic-cultural structures of the centers.

The centers have grown increasingly aware that their own discourse has been drained and, to a certain extent, the sources of the "South" are far more than a mere point of reference and difference. As Ticio Escobar would say, "... the mother countries have every right to refill their worn-down imaginary stocks by appropriating the symbols from the periphery (just as the subordinate cultures have the right to use the symbols of the mother countries); but they can not confiscate history or fraudulently invent distant memories, in what would be just one more sign of the all-devouring effects of progress and the lethargy of smug imagination" (3).

(1) Escobar Ticio. Various texts on Culture, Transition and Modernity. Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional. Centro Cultural Español Juan Salazar, 1992, p. 115, 116.

(2) Contemporary Art of the Non-Aligned Countries 1995. Catalogue, Jakarta, Indonesia, April-June, 1995.

(3) Escobar Ticio, idem., p. 136.