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Museumscapes: An Analytical Framework for Analysing Museum Spaces

The lecture will help spotlight an analytical framework for participants and researchers interested in conducting cross-regional studies. Comparing one museum with another is not a straightforward task due to the multitude of museum spaces, e.g. museums devoted to artworks, history or political partitions (to mention a few). Nevertheless, these museums are embedded in a complex web of sociopolitical forces, which, when organised within a neat theoretical framework, can help make cross-regional comparisons manageable despite the multitude of museum spaces. With 'Museumscapes,' my lecture will help fill this theoretical lacuna.

The museumscape may be divided into distinct spaces. First, macro-space – or the broader landscape or the urban-scape, within which a museum is embedded, e.g. the time period and the associated political development of the times during which the museum came into being. In other words, the broader geographical or political landscape within which the museum operates. Second, the meso-scape or the architectural setting of a museum or the appropriation of a historical building to be used as the location of a museum. In other words, narrating museological stories with the help of museum architecture and the actual physical setting or the building that houses a museum. Third, the micro-space that includes elements like the glass enclosures and confines and the coupled textual explanation offered for objects on display. In other words, the micro setting of the museum itself.

Through my lecture, I not only introduce the idea of 'museumscapes' but also showcase two brief analytical case studies from the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore and the Partition Museum in New Delhi to exemplify the concept of museumscapes. Theoretical contributions that inspired the idea of 'museumscapes' will be duly acknowledged.

As a researcher in the Global South, I have been investigating the differences in spatial layout of museum spaces between the Global North and the South and how these layouts help negotiate a sense of collective identity for the populace that the museums serve. Focusing specifically on the museums of India and Singapore over the past two years, my research and fieldwork exemplify how these museums have played an exceptional role in bringing to the fore the silent or suppressed voices of women and migrants, while also serving as the fulcrum for national identities in post-colonial nation-states. I have also looked at special exhibitions that museums have organised from time to time, partly to address various diplomatic needs. For instance, I recently explored how the special display at the Peranakan Museum – Fukusa: Japanese gift covers from the Chris Hall collection – helped portray ties between Japan and Singapore with the help of exquisite Japanese gift covers. In a nutshell, I explore how museums narrate myriad tales – spotlighting issues as wide as political partitions, migration and diplomacy – in myriad ways. My forthcoming endeavours include adopting a cross-regional approach, by looking at museums in India, Switzerland and Singapore, to decipher how national and regional museums help construct a sense of collective identities – both regional as well as national. I have recently been awarded a visiting research grant by SNSF in conjunction with my host at Geneva. This grant will allow scope to look at Swiss museums and their role in the construction of regional identities towards the end of this year (2025). For this application, I would like to emphasise my academic and research background in museum studies and heritage.

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