

**Title**

Engaging Asia

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### **Abstract**

This paper is in two parts. Firstly, Julian Goddard speaks about the long relationship Australian schools of Art and Design have enjoyed with Asia and some possibilities growing out of that experience. This can be seen in the broader context of Australian Higher Education becoming increasingly internationalised in line with the forces of globalisation over the past three decades. However, Australia's proximity to Asia and the region's growing appetite for education has lent itself to new experiences for Australian academics and artists. The second part of the paper has S. Chandrasekaran respond with a blueprint to strengthen the relationship between Australia and Asia through awareness and understanding. By focusing on Singapore, the paper argues for an appreciation of the long associations between Australian Art and Design Schools and similar institutions in Asia. At the heart of these associations are personal friendships that take the relationships beyond transactional and financial reward.

### **Biographies**

Professor Julian Goddard

Professor Julian Goddard is an academic, curator and artist specialising in the aesthetics of the everyday. Over the past 30 years as well as being a teacher and post grad supervisor, as a curator Julian has made numerous exhibitions and published widely on Australian, Aboriginal and Concrete art, including three books, book chapters, articles, papers and many catalogue essays. From 2015 -2019 Julian was Dean of the School of Art at RMIT and before that Head of the School of Design and art at Curtin University.

Dr. S. Chandrasekaran

Dr. S. Chandrasekaran obtained his doctorate from Curtin University in 2007. Over the past eighteen years he has held several academic positions both in Singapore and abroad. Currently, he is Head of McNally School of Fine Arts at LASALLE, College of the Arts. He represented Singapore in major exhibitions such as Havana Biennial (Cuba),

1st Asia Pacific Triennial (Brisbane), Asia-Pacific Performance Art Festival (Canada), International Performance Art Festival (Poland), 49th Venice Biennale, 8th Festival of Contemporary Art (Slovenia), Singapore Biennale 2016 and New Ben Art Festival (Taipei), 2018.

In 2016, he was invited as a keynote speaker for 1st international Conference on Social Arts and Transdisciplinarity at University of Evora, Portugal, and also for 3rd Academic International Conference on Multi-Disciplinary Studies and Education, Oxford, UK, 2017. He presented papers at international conferences such as Gender, Sexuality and Justice: Resilience in Uncertain Times, Chinese Hong Kong University, 2018 and 5th Arts & Humanities Conference, University College of Copenhagen, 2019.

His research interests are Cross-Cultural Studies, Asian Aesthetics, Life Science and Experimental Theatre.

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**Keywords:** Asia, Art and Design, Collaboration, Cultures

### **Part 1.**

#### **Julian Goddard**

Over at least the past thirty years Australian Universities' Art and Design Schools have had a significant engagement with Asia. In late 1987 Curtin University began an arrangement with Singapore's Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) whereby it franchised its art courses allowing Nanyang to offer Singapore's first BA in Art. RMIT similarly began a relationship with LaSalle College of the Arts, in 1993, again by franchising its BA in Fine Arts.

These arrangements were predicated on the fact that neither Nanyang nor LaSalle had local status that allowed them to confer degrees in their own right. At the time it was not possible to gain a degree in art or design in Singapore other than through these franchised arrangements. This lasted for about and as 20 years. As with the art and design programmes, Singapore became a hub for many Australian offshore tertiary institutions in the 1990s and 2000s as it opened up to progressive education. While many Singaporean students chose to travel to Australia to enroll as 'onshore international students' Curtin, RMIT and others also catered to students who chose not to travel to Australia for their tertiary training necessitating Australian staff to travel to Singapore.

Through the 1990s both Curtin and RMIT fostered these relationships as part of an expanding desire by Australian universities to engage in the new 'Asian market' for tertiary education. This was at a time when Australian Universities' budgets were starting to be strained under the Dawkins Reforms (1988) that brought greater competition and a strong demand from the new universities' for appropriate funding. One of the solutions, and effects of the Dawkins Reforms, was the need to seek increased international students to boost University incomes. As such one can't help but acknowledge that the motivation for Curtin's and RMIT's art school interactions begun in the 1980s and 1990s was basically financial; at least on the Australian side. In a manner that fitted well with the growing sense of Asia as a

market for Australian commodities and services. Asia as a market for Australian Tertiary Education proved to be very lucrative.

According to a report published in 2011, from 1986 to 1994 full fee-paying international student enrolments in Australia rose from 2,000 to 70,000 students in just eight years<sup>ii</sup>. That is breath-taking by any account, but as can be seen from the graphs below this trend has continued with exceptional growth in incomes coming from Asian countries. Income from overseas students from 2008 to 2017 more than doubled from around \$3billion to nearly \$7.5billion (Fig.3) of which over 80% (2018) came from 10 Asian countries (Fig. 4).

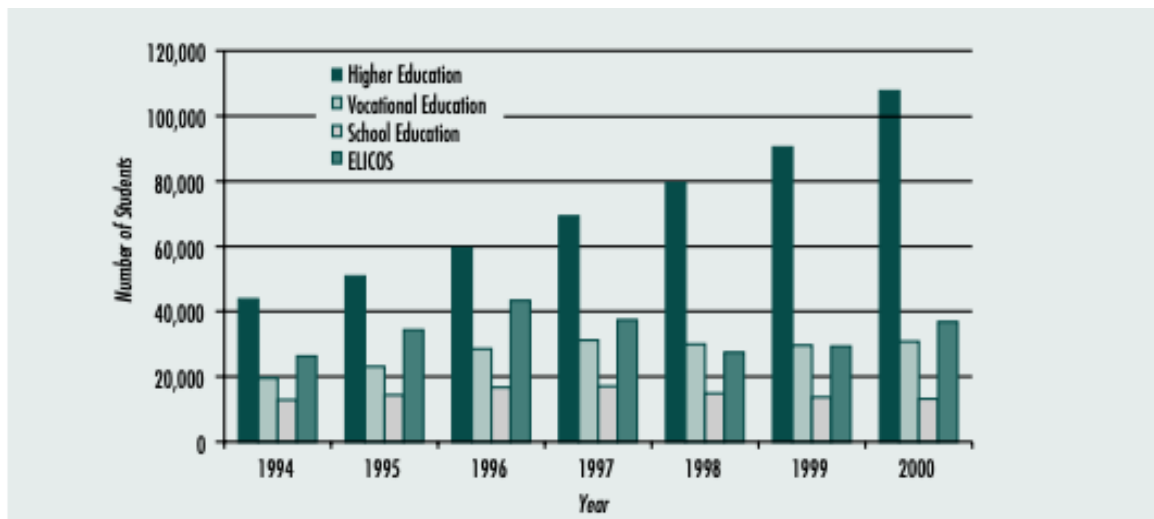


Figure 1. Overseas Students by Major Sector, 1994 to 2000

Source: Department Education, Science and Training, *Overseas Student Statistics*, 2000

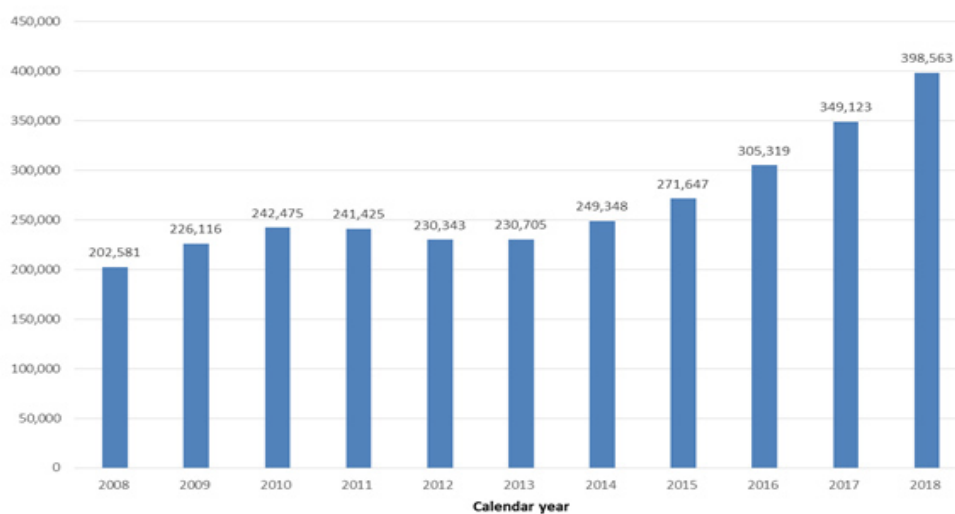


Figure 2. Higher Education Enrollments, Overseas Students, 2008 to 2018

Source: Department of Education, *Basic Pivot table 2015 -2019*, December 2018.

	<b>Total revenue from all operations (\$'000)</b>	<b>Change from previous year</b>	<b>Revenue from fee paying overseas students (\$'000)</b>	<b>Change from previous year</b>	<b>Percentage of revenue from fee paying OS students</b>
<b>2008</b>	\$18,955,909		\$2,946,127		15.5%
<b>2009</b>	\$20,468,862	8.0%	\$3,414,687	15.9%	16.7%
<b>2010</b>	\$22,158,466	8.3%	\$3,881,656	13.7%	17.5%
<b>2011</b>	\$23,658,742	6.8%	\$4,124,064	6.2%	17.4%
<b>2012</b>	\$25,210,033	6.6%	\$4,134,768	0.3%	16.4%
<b>2013</b>	\$26,332,964	4.5%	\$4,290,808	3.8%	16.3%
<b>2014</b>	\$27,751,858	5.4%	\$4,741,973	10.5%	17.1%
<b>2015</b>	\$28,609,979	3.1%	\$5,349,879	12.8%	18.7%
<b>2016</b>	\$30,147,079	5.4%	\$6,249,049	16.8%	20.7%
<b>2017</b>	\$32,028,091	6.2%	\$7,457,002	19.3%	23.3%

Figure 3. Australian University Revenue From Fee Paying Overseas Students, 2008 to 2017.

Source: Department of Education, *Financial Reports of Higher Education Providers*, December 2018

<b>Nationality</b>	<b>NSW</b>	<b>Vic.</b>	<b>QLD</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>WA</b>	<b>Tas.</b>	<b>NT</b>	<b>ACT</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>% of all OS</b>
<b>China</b>	58,510	50,878	17,686	8,701	5,328	2,762	188	8,538	152,591	38.3
<b>India</b>	20,512	33,696	8,705	3,287	3,949	601	282	825	71,857	18.0
<b>Nepal</b>	19,306	4,720	2,141	776	703	121	378	88	28,233	7.1
<b>Vietnam</b>	5,462	6,617	1,452	880	792	232	75	208	15,718	3.9
<b>Malaysia</b>	2,243	6,041	1,794	1,237	1,781	576	19	297	13,988	3.5
<b>Pakistan</b>	4,709	4,351	769	320	921	105	55	167	11,397	2.9
<b>Indonesia</b>	3,153	4,692	754	216	671	30	35	324	9,875	2.5
<b>Sri Lanka</b>	981	6,599	691	249	413	95	37	144	9,209	2.3
<b>Hong Kong</b>	2,721	2,142	1,872	1,095	712	128	14	247	8,931	2.2
<b>Singapore</b>	1,368	2,454	1,291	537	1,215	265	1	197	7,328	1.8
<b>Other</b>	24,620	18,617	13,848	3,424	5,651	954	456	1,866	69,436	17.4
<b>All OS</b>	143,585	140,807	51,003	20,722	22,136	5,869	1,540	12,901	398,563	100.0

Figure 4. Higher Education Enrolments, Overseas (OS) Students, State and Territory, Top Ten Nationalities, 2018.

Source: Department of Education, *Basic Pivot Table 2015- 2019*, December 2018.

The selling of Australian tertiary education has been a spectacular success with huge financial rewards. Tertiary education is now a major export industry with Asian countries accounting for a majority of enrollments. But what else might this engagement mean and how might we learn from it? How much do we understand what the cultural effects might be and how much have Asian students learnt about Australia from their experiences? And what has Australia learnt from this historical engagement? What can we take into the 'Asian century'? Indeed, is the notion of Asia even sustainable given the massive pressures of change at work as this century unfolds?

## **Asia**

The word Asia has lost what the Pragmatists call 'cash value'. That is, it no longer works in the manner it was initially intended to. While the term still has currency in a very loose sense, the lived reality of that part of the world the word tries to describe, has moved a long way since its conceptualization in Europe millennia ago. The notion of Asia is a Euro-centric construction, invented more to define Europe both geographically and more importantly culturally, than to articulate the immensely diverse set of abstractions it now tries to represent. As a thought, Asia is no longer coherent; if it ever was. The first use of the notion appeared in Greece around 440BCE – as in the ancient Greek word *Assuwa* – used to describe the east bank of the Aegean Sea, today's Turkey. It then progressively grew to encompass any lands 'discovered' by Europeans east, north-east and south-east of the Aegean. In other words, anywhere else than the known world of the Greeks.

The manner in which Australia has inherited this old-world idea of Asia does not of course sit with our real experiences, both geographically and culturally. Any notion of Asia being the 'Far East' only compounds this disorientation. For the vast majority of Australians, the lived-experience of Asia is either that of a place of family-origin, or somewhere to visit on holiday; quite often both. In 2016 more than a third of Australians born overseas were from Asia, and Indonesia was, after New Zealand, the second most visited destination for Australians travelling outside of Australia. <sup>iii</sup>

While for many Australians Asia had already changed by 1992 when Prime Minister Keating made his famous pronouncement that 'Asia is where our future substantially lies'<sup>iv</sup>, but for some it appeared to be something of a surprise. It had taken World War 2 and the American War in Vietnam, to make Australia realise it was not after all, a small island somewhere off the coast of England, but an integral part of a morphing geo-political region, not in the East on the other side of the world, but right next door. Even so Keating's statement was met by pushback from Australian nationalists not wanting to agree with him. Unfortunately, still

today, the old, inherited European meme of Asia as 'other' persists amongst fringe groups such as One Nation and other xenophobic and racist mobilisations.

Australians now travel to countries that are no longer generically 'Asian' but distinctly singular; Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and so on. Does anyone go to Asia anymore? No, it's Bali, Java, Kalimantan, Rajasthan, Kerala and so on. 'Asia' has always been an abstraction. But now as an idea fading rapidly, it is losing coherence and being replaced by a more mature and experiential understanding of cultural differences and diversities.

In a recent edition of *Australian Foreign Affairs: Are We Asian Yet?*, historian Emeritus Professor David Walker outlines anxieties about an 'Asian Future' with some good advice for Australians: 'we will have to get closer and come to know them as people, not just as a market' (Walker, 2019). Australian art and design schools have a role to play in this new thinking and are set through years of engagement to foster people-centric understanding of our near neighbours.

While the arrangements by Curtin and RMIT in fine arts back in the late 1980s and early 1990s were innovative and effective, both engagements were driven by the financial pressures of the day. A part of the innovation brought-to-bear by Curtin and RMIT was constructing suitable academic articulations between them and their Singaporean partners. For their Australian Tertiary Awards to be *bona fide* within these partnerships, the Australian regulator, the Australian Council of Tertiary Awards, required the programmes had to be equivalent in Singapore. This necessitated Australian staff regularly travelling to Singapore and inevitably staff from both Curtin and RMIT began to build networks and relationships in Singapore. For many of them this was their first experience of an overseas' art scene and one very different to Australia.

At the time these arrangements began the Singaporean contemporary art scene and art community was small, trying to be radical and constantly scrutinized by the authorities; including being subject to censorship. Very different than the Australian scene which was highly visible, but virtually unregulated, and free to do almost whatever it liked. This contrast was very evident to the Australian staff and presented some real difficulties for the Singaporean students who were being exposed to contemporary Australian and international art. Post-modernism's emphasis on identity politics, including; feminism, emerging Indigenous rights, Marxist and psychoanalytical analyses of art and culture, were just a part



of the heady mix of the day. Such ideas were not popular in Singapore, at least not amongst the ruling elite and government agencies.

In this environment the Australian staff (who on the whole appreciated the nuanced situation) and their Singaporean colleagues, and especially their students, formed very strong and close bonds. The staff got to know the Singaporean students through sharing their aspirations and anxieties and helped build pathways that allowed graduates to affect, in a modest way, Singaporean society for the better. This could be in part, because contemporary art requires discussions of art's social role, the responsibilities of artists, the necessity of expression and the use of critical perspectives. This shared experience and close engagement, built bonds that last to today with friendships that have endured<sup>v</sup>. The Australian art-lecturers and supervisors who went through that experience learnt the contract with their students went way beyond a 'fee for service'.

Conversely while Singaporean students and artists learnt much from the Australian artists/academics, the Australians in turn broadened their cultural understandings of the world through first-hand experience. They learnt to see another set of possibilities not waiting for them in the UK, US or Europe but much closer to home. With this growing awareness, and subsequent other similar examples in more recent years, the expanded cultural relationships with countries, institutions and individuals has helped break up the abstraction of Asia into a more experiential understanding of the geo-political and social significance of our close neighbours.

A role for Australian art and design schools in the future may well be to establish a common ground where we can share with and learn from our partners. While it might be unwise to suggest that role can go beyond education, it might be worth considering that art schools can form a space for collaboration, shared experience and knowledge, and respect. This is a broader sense of engagement than 'the market' can ever deliver.

## **Part 2.**

### **S. Chandrasekaran**

#### **Re-engaging Asia - Kampung Membuat**

## **Shared Experience**

Having lived in Australia for over ten years, I share the same concerns with Julian. That is, we need to develop a shared experience that goes beyond seeing Asia as a commodity.

Asia has a crucial role in contributing to making changes to our present educational framework. As a student at Curtin University, I experienced various challenges in presenting my art practice from a cultural perspective. One aspect of the problem was the constant dilemma in having to interpret spiritual elements as part of artistic language. Being an Indian, I am very conscious of how culture holds meanings about 'I' and 'Self'; and also, how spiritual elements are influencing my artistic practice. However, I was still not able to comprehend how to interpret the spiritual elements into artistic language. I believe it was because we lack a platform that allows us to share cultural differences.

The educational system should focus on expanding the student's experience beyond classroom learning through experiential knowledge. Also, it needs to provide a conducive environment that will allow each other to share their cultural differences. With these sorts of associations, it will contribute to learning as a shared experience. As such, it will also add to understanding Asia in a different light rather than viewing it solely as a market.

## **Shared-Ground**

I agree with Julian's comment that Australians need to gain a clearer understanding of Asia from both perspectives - geographically and culturally. To understand each other from these perspectives, we need to position ourselves on a shared ground.

The notion of shared ground is not a new concept in Asia. The site of a temple is a shared-ground where the public gathers for ceremonies that are entirely given over to the arts: sculpture, carving, music, painting, offerings, dances, drama, poetry readings, shadow puppet performances and etc.

The shared ground engages the cultural differences and gives meaning to 'specific knowledge' about the community. It also crosses boundaries at many levels giving us a platform to be involved with the culture of others from their location. This sort of socio-cultural experience not only provides a new grounding in understanding human behaviours influenced by culture, but it also brings to light various cultural beliefs that stem from the geographical stance.

Having a shared ground between Australia and Asia will allow us to cross boundaries at many levels and thus, bridge cultures through human experience.

### **Concept of Kampung Pembuat**

The word 'Kampung' means 'a village/gathering of people in a place'. The word 'Pembuat' means 'maker'. The term is adapted from the Malay language.

The concept of Kampung Pembuat is to investigate our differences and similarities, and also to create cultural and social awareness thus creating a direct relationship with the culture of others. In this paper, I will be exploring the concept of Kampung through my performances, over the last years.

Here, the concept of Kampung Pembuat is engaged within three aspects: -

- Shared Knowledge
- Making Meaning
- Local Knowledge

### **Shared Knowledge**

Shared knowledge allows one to understand the cultural beliefs of others through a responsive learning environment.



Figure 5. S.Chandrasekaran, *Bleeding in Circle*, Nitiprayan, Jogjakarta, Indonesia 2005

This performance titled *Bleeding in Circle* was performed at Nitiprayan, a small village near Jogyakarta (Fig.5). Before the performance, I discussed with Miko the manner of piercing the hooks through the skin. Miko came forward and said, 'Maafkan saya, saya mau salawatt' (I am sorry, I need to pray). Then, he held both my hands and performed salam<sup>vi</sup>.

Subsequently, he went behind me and recited a short prayer, quoting some Arabic verses from the Quran. Next, he stood for a moment in silence and then proceeded with the act of piercing.

Such an undertaking by an individual who empathizes with others contributes to shared knowledge on site. Miko's shared his cultural beliefs with me. In doing so, it endorses the existence of us on the site and also it validates ones to understand the cultural knowledge of others, and including ethics, identity and language

### **Making Meaning**

Making meaning through the authenticity of the materials allows one to reflect, connect and transform.

- Reflect – Reflecting after an act of making.
- Connect – Making connections with the art making process
- Transform- Creating new interpretations



*Figure 6. S.Chandrasekaran Reunion, Wongol Village, Kongju, Korea, 2003*

With the performance titled *Reunion* (Fig.6), I introduced spiritual characters related to yoga and ritual practices from Hinduism. During the performance, I also adopted the sitting posture of the Buddha, called the lotus position (cross legs) and sat under the tree for eight

hours. In this period, some of the red strips that had been cut-off were tied to the branches of the tree to symbolize the connection between nature (tree) and human (my body).



Figure 7. Rock-like Pagodas (Koreans)



Figure 8. Spiritual bonding (Indians)

Korean's spiritual sentiments with nature are expressed by people forming pagodas with layers of stones (Fig.7). While for Indians, the spiritual bonding with nature is by tying sacred strings around a tree or hanging stones on the branches (Fig.8).

Upon observing my performance, one of the elders said: "*I responded to the spiritual element in your performance, and I want to be part of your work*". Here, the elder reflects about his association through the spiritual sentiments. He also responded to my performance by stacking stones around my performance. This sort of intervention from others indicates a "transformation" is taking place on the site, and thus, gives rise to new interpretation about the performance. In this performance, my body became a pivoted point in contributing to making meaning from the activity conveyed on the site.

Making meaning brings forth new meanings to artistic practice whenever it engages with the culture of others.

### **Local Knowledge**

Local knowledge is a "specific knowledge" developed by people of a community over a period of time. It is unique to every culture in the various aspects of ethical practices, art-making processes (craft), community development, and the environment.





Figure 9. S.Chandrasekaran '*Asrti-Bumi*', Tejakula, Bali, Indonesia, 2000

*'Asrti-Bumi'* was a site-specific and duration work which was performed for five hours. During this performance, I was half-buried in the ground. Before the performance, landowner Bapa Sugeha had some apprehensions surrounding the performance. He was concerned that the land should not be polluted by animal blood, especially pig, as he was a practising Muslim. I reassured the owner that the land would not be polluted with animal blood. At the end of the performance, he said "my friend, having your body buried in the ground had blessed the land. I am honoured, thank you".

The above performance highlights one can bring forth a sense of cohesion within the community by recognizing the local knowledge. In doing so, it contributes to respecting the cultural beliefs of others in an appropriate manner.

With the concept of Kampung Membuat, it encourages dialogue among various communities through the observing and learning of cultural beliefs and ethics of others. This sort of experiences does not only challenge our artistic practice but also increases our awareness of others through their cultural narratives.

## **Conclusion**

This paper argues for a more personal sensibility in assessing the outcomes of the long associations between Australian Art and Design schools and their Asian partners. Through a historical account of the relationship between the Art and Design schools of Curtin University and RMIT with Singapore's Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and LaSalle College of the Arts, and the exponential growth of the international student market for Australian universities, the paper speaks to other ways of assessing success than merely financial

gain. S. Chandrasekaran's account of his art practice highlights notions of care and community in establishing relationships that cross boundaries whereby artists can work cohesively through a positive engagement of shared experience. This account foregrounds the value of relationships and acts as a metaphor for the quality of a continuing engagement between Australian Art and Design schools and their Asian partners.

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<sup>i</sup> The 1988 Dawkins Reforms saw the number of Australian universities grow from 19 to 36 overnight.

<sup>ii</sup> Source: Colin Walters. Australian Education International, Going Global 2011  
<https://internationaleducation.gov.au> › Going\_Global\_Colin Walters. Retrieved 31.10.2019

<sup>iii</sup> The destination for vast majority of Australians visiting Indonesia is Bali

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.keating.org.au/shop/item/australia-and-asia-knowing-who-we-are---7-april-1992>. Retrieved 31.10.2018

<sup>v</sup> For instance. RMIT's School of Art has a 21-year-old partnership with the Hong Kong Art School.

<sup>vi</sup> Salaam is often performed by bowing low and placing the right palm on the forehead. It is regarded by most Islamic scholars to be forbidden for a Muslim to return the Salam greeting of a non-Muslim in full. Not forgetting, Miko is a Muslim, and I am a Hindu.

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