

Unpacking the Asian Library. Histories of knowledge exchange and collecting from Asia to the West across decolonization

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As a follow-up to earlier workshops held in 2019, and building on a global, multi-sited academic and librarian's research network expanding in their wake, this double panel focuses on the collecting histories, and knowledge networks in Asia, and between Asia and the West, and on the (epistemic) violence and shifting power relations they reflect, that helped shaping the so-called 'Asian Library' worldwide across decolonization. We emphatically scrutinize these histories from an Asia- and/or South-centred perspective. While the 'treasures' kept in Asian libraries worldwide rank as expressions of 'enlightened' collecting, and as keys to understanding the wider world, they also entail colonial violence, and networks of collecting based in the South, and thus multiple forms of knowledge, agency, exchange and production 'outside' the text we get access to when we enter these libraries. The question is how, why so, and for whom (not)? This question has become all the more topical in the light of the fierce public debates reviving in the past five years on decolonizing museums and academic institutes, on 'repatriation' (or 'restitutions') of 'colonial' artefacts (whether looted or acquired in structural unequal relations), also leading to initiatives to conduct and expand provenance research to this aim. Partly engaging with this debate, this panel also provides insight into how questions of 'repatriation' (implying a clear 'Patria' or original owner) also can simplify the complex, multi-layered practices and forms of knowledge exchange that shaped the content of Asian Libraries. With books, manuscripts and visual material therefore not only considered for their content, but primarily as 'objects', this panel aims, for the nineteenth and twentieth century, to gain insight in the 'Asian' agency behind the makings of these collections. For this we will explore forms of knowledge and knowledge exchange at the levels of production, collecting, translation, travelling, inventorizing and storing, in the context of colonial relationships, decolonization, and inter-colonial, transnational, and inter-Asian networks.

Participants (amongst others): Keng We Koh (Nanyang Technological University), Teren Sevea (Harvard University), Sri Margana (Gadjah Maja University), Marije Plomp (Leiden University Library), Ricardo Roque (University of Lisboa), Marieke Bloembergen (KITLV/Leiden University)