

00:00 – 01:32

Kerrine: Hello and welcome to another podcast hosted by culture360.ASEF.org, the arts and culture portal of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). So I'm Kerrine, and I manage the activities of culture360 and I'm your host for today's episode. So today, I'm very thrilled to introduce our guest for today's podcast. We have Sharmilla Ganesan. So Sharmilla is a seasoned writer, journalist and arts and culture critic, with over 15 years of experience covering the Malaysian and regional cultural scenes.

And it's been an absolute pleasure working with Sharmilla on various projects under culture360, including our latest update of the Mobility Funding Guides for ASEAN.

So a little bit more on the Mobility Funding Guides. ASEF through culture360, we've collaborated with On the Move (OTM), the European network for cultural mobility to jointly present the [Mobility Funding Guides for International Cultural Exchange](#) for the 51 countries of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) that we work in.

Kerrine: So whether you are an artist or a culture professional who are looking for mobility funding opportunities, we hope that these guides will be useful in providing an in-depth overview of organisations that fund exchanges in and between Asia and Europe.

So based on the extensive research that we've done for these guides, we've invited Sharmilla to join us on the podcast to explore mobility opportunities within ASEAN, as well as the intersection of artistic mobility and environmental sustainability.

So, Sharmilla, welcome to the podcast.

01:33 – 03:25

Sharmilla: Thank you for having me.

Kerrine: Okay, maybe to start, if you could just tell us a little bit more about yourself, your work and why cultural mobility is important to you.

Sharmilla: So I think you've covered a large portion of what I do there. I'm suppose technically no longer a journalist, because I very recently made a move into working for the nonprofit sector, but I still do a lot of arts writing.

And I also do, I suppose, arts development, consulting and all sorts of things related to the arts that's not actually making art. So I think I'm uniquely positioned in some ways to talk about why cultural mobility is important.

I've personally benefitted from being able to access opportunities both in the arts and culture sector, as well as in the journalism and media sector throughout my life. And I do think that being able to travel and being able to communicate and work with and learn from people of different cultures and contexts, organisations in different countries tremendously helps arts makers and

creatives in being able to both learn and level up and upskill. But also just I think on a more intangible level, get ideas and just absorb what other people are doing.

And maybe in a larger sense, feel like you belong to a community of people that's not just confined by your country. And in some cases, and in a very real sense, in ASEAN, countries, that can be quite challenging when it comes to arts making. So I think cultural mobility and opportunities for cultural mobility are actually incredibly important.

And I'm very happy actually, to have been able to do this for ASEF. Because it helped me also think about the importance of not just those opportunities being available, but actually being accessible and for people to know that these opportunities exist.

03:26 – 05:45

Kerrine: So maybe we could dive into the current landscape. How have mobility support types evolved over time to meet the needs of artists and cultural professionals of different disciplines, especially in the ASEAN region.

Sharmilla: So I had to go through the older version of the guides before I could update them for this most recent version. So I think I can speak to a little bit about how they've evolved. I do think that there is an increasing awareness of the multiple ways in which the arts can exist.

And so, I noticed that a lot more grants are not necessarily confining the notion of arts into specific things. So there are quite a lot of opportunities that open up the idea – you could be doing dance or you could be doing music. And I think the idea of using culture rather than using the arts, seems to be happening more frequently.

Also, just in terms of evolving, I would think and I think we can also get into this a little bit more specifically later. I do feel like compared to even 10 years ago, or maybe 15 years ago, the availability of local or regional opportunities or grants, are a lot less compared to what they used to be, particularly in the ASEAN region.

Instead, I did notice that a lot of the availability of funding and grants are coming from the Global North, quote unquote. However, we are calling it these days. And being offered to, in this case, Asia, which is not a bad thing. And you know, I think it's encouraging to see countries that may have the means to do this, open up these opportunities.

Of course, Japan and Korea, I think, offer a fair number of opportunities for within Asia itself. But I did think it was kind of sad that the number of opportunities that were available, even in comparing the two versions of the guides, I think the older ones were around 2012. So 2012 to 2023, 2024, so many had just died in the interim. Or just not available anymore or, changed significantly, which made me a little sad.

05:46 – 08:25

Kerrine: So it's quite interesting to know that things have changed, in terms of the landscape, not just in terms of the number of opportunities that are available. But I guess also times have also

changed, which is why it has led to all of these changes in the types of opportunities that we're seeing nowadays.

So how do you think recent global crises such as the pandemic, or maybe it could be changes in political context. How much of an impact do they have on the types of opportunities that are available in ASEAN?

Sharmilla: So it seems to me that the pandemic may have been responsible for a lot of this. Although I do feel like it also could be the gradual declining of funding for the arts in a lot of Asian countries as well.

But maybe the pandemic brought that almost to like, a sharp precipice, right? Because it did feel like a number of the opportunities that were active even until 2020, 2021. You saw the drop of or the dying of those opportunities in 2023. So, you know, they were available as recently as 2 or 3 years ago, and then from 2023, they weren't anymore.

I think in the case of Malaysia, for example, the Borak Arts Festival. That was running until very recently as well and then a lot of changes have also happened in Malaysia in terms of politics. So arts organisations that were a lot more active or better funded before are no longer either operational or they are operating in a much smaller scale.

So the first thing that then dries up seems to be the ability to give out funding. I think the other change that may have happened, and I think this I'm thinking more from. I think I'm combining my experience working on the guides, with more on the ground, just discussions that I've been having with arts makers, particularly in Malaysia, but also in the Philippines and so on.

That post-pandemic, I feel like the urgency for a lot of arts organisations has been less, less focus on things like mobility and being able to travel and more about just livelihoods. Because a lot of artists and arts makers lost a massive amount of their income during the lockdown, and I think they are still recovering from that.

And so I think a lot of organisations that would have otherwise perhaps helped with things like mobility are now refocusing their money towards production grants, for example. So I did notice that there were production grants still. Still less than they used to be, but those don't seem to have gone away as much as some of the mobility or the travel grants.

08:26 – 09:28

Kerrine: So I guess there is already an impact in terms of who is funding cultural mobility. And in terms of the types of funders that we are seeing right now, are they mostly being funded by bigger organisations? What about the smaller and more independent funders? Do we still see them around, or are they shifting their focus elsewhere as well?

Sharmilla: Actually, I feel like there were so few small organisations in the list. I was looking through it in preparation for our conversation as well, just to refresh my memory and I feel like

there were so few. There were very, very few. Even the larger organisations tend to be, international organisations that have a presence in individual countries.

So the Japan Foundation or the British Council. And then they may have specific grants that are specific to certain countries or certain regions, but I really don't think that they are. I could count on one hand I think, the number of independent organisations that are offering grants in general. And then mobility grants even fewer.

09:29 – 10:47

Kerrine: Also, in terms of the types of calls that we're seeing right now. Are there more popular destinations that people are wanting to travel to or are the calls mainly centered around traveling within Asia?

Sharmilla: I think just by the mere fact that the grants are coming from particular regions of the world, usually Europe. And therefore, it's almost inevitable that a lot of the travel happens from Asia to Europe.

Well, not necessarily just Asia, because a lot of these funds are usually for developing countries. But yes, essentially the point of destination is Europe. Sometimes there's cultural exchange involved. Of course, there's then again, Japan and Korea are distinct in in some sense, because in Asia there are opportunities to be able to go to Japan or go to Korea, South Korea and to be able to do work there.

But yeah, no, I think it largely feels relatively one way. I would love to see more opportunities within Asian countries. I think especially with India, China becoming emerging economies, maybe not even emerging anymore in the case of China. I'm hoping that there will be more opportunities for these sorts of travels and exchanges to happen within Asia.

10:48 – 11:34

Kerrine: Which is interesting if I were to pick up on that point. Back then when ASEF was still running our mobility grant, one thing that we noticed almost every year was that there was this interest in people from Asia wanting to travel to Europe. So I guess that still hasn't quite changed, mainly because of the type of funding opportunities that are available. And there's also that interest from Asia to travel, somewhere to Europe as well.

Sharmilla: I agree, I also think that there is a very specific notion of being able to travel to Europe, or UK or the US, and to be able to present our work is still viewed as aspirational. And it's viewed as also opening up opportunities. So I think that dynamic is still very much present.

11:35 – 14:30

Kerrine: So after looking and painting the picture of the types of opportunities that are available, the kind of calls that are present, were there any challenges that you faced while updating the guides? Because it is quite a massive task to have to update the guides of nine different countries in ASEAN, excluding Indonesia and every country has a different context. The funding systems are

also a little bit different. So maybe you could share with us a little bit more about the challenges that you faced?

Sharmilla: Well, reading the nine versions, which were also kind of again, because they're older at this point. Just looking at them to, to check whether each one was still active, actually took up so much time.

And this, it wasn't uninteresting. It's just that it often, it presents certain frustrations. Sometimes some websites, they will change each year because they change the website link right. So it's like a 2023. it looks like it's no longer active, but actually they've just changed the link. So that's sort of just the practical frustrations of having to look through multiple opportunities, making sure they're still updated, and then making sure that they fit the ambit of what the guide is, because we were focusing on mobility. So just making sure that the terms of the guides, terms of the opportunities fit what we wanted them to be.

So those are the more sort of logistical, are these things still active? Does it sit in this guide or not? But then when it came down to the individual countries, being able to check what was available on a local level, was actually probably the biggest challenge.

Because typically these ASEAN countries, language is a big, big thing. So and I was confined to being able to work only in English or Bahasa Malaysia. And so and even then, I mean, I can understand and speak Bahasa Malaysia, but the resources were just quite poor, you know. You would have to end up kind of tracking opportunities because you might read about something in an article and then you pick up that name and then you do research and then you realise like, oh okay, this might have died three years ago.

Or you'll read about it in some policy paper and then you kind of start tracking it. So I think it is really just that, the information is not organised. The information is not necessarily updated. It's not in a language that's accessible to everybody and there's no real ability to tell whether something is active.

Actually that sometimes is a problem, because the website was still up and then it kind of looks like it's still active. But then when you start reading about it, you realise nobody's been awarded in the last three years. Which tells me that actually as an arts practitioner, it must be incredibly frustrating to have to go through all of this information just to figure out if you can get the funding you need.

14:31 – 16:24

Kerrine: If I can also add on to that, that's actually one of the pain points that we have when sourcing content for culture360. Because we work across so many different countries and there are some countries such as Brunei, where we really don't know much about and it's very hard to gain access to information, mainly because of language.

And if I'm looking at China, there's also things such as, that firewall that they have set up. So it's very hard to even access links that might be present there but we can't access it here for some

reason. Some countries would have more information where we are able to access a little bit more and then some countries where we don't quite know so much about.

Sharmilla: Could I add, actually, now that you mentioned that. One of the things I remember finding quite frustrating was when a grant or an opportunity and this actually tends to happen more in, in Europe because again, Europe works in a different languages too.

So for example, Germany might say. A particular German grant might say this applies for is it CDC countries? But then what are CDC countries right? And then actually not every Asian country qualifies for that grant. So now I have to find a list of that country, of those lists of countries. And I have to make sure it's the most updated list, which would then lead me possibly to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, which is in German. And then I have to figure out how to translate that into English. So it's stuff like that, which again as a researcher who's being paid to do it, fine.

But as, as like an individual arts maker having to just go through these multiple steps. So I do think maybe that even on the parts of the people giving out these grants. If they maybe think a little bit more about how to make the information in their grant materials more accessible to people who don't speak the same language or for whom English is not the first language. I think that would go a long way.

16:25 – 17:02

Kerrine: I guess one of the pain points, it's also transparency. So making clear all of these guidelines. Because every country and every fund works quite differently, even their standard of what constitutes as a CDC country like you said, everyone uses a very different definition.

So definitely all of this could have been made clearer, more structured. So that for someone who is applying for the grant, it's quite easy for me at a glance to see these are the kind of things that I need to look out for, I immediately qualify for this and that. And I wouldn't have had to source through everything without finding one that suits me.

17:03 – 19:08

Kerrine: And I guess with all of that, my last question to you would also be, how have all of these changes, all these shifts, made you reflect and rethink how you consider your work and the kind of projects that you do, you carry out?

Sharmilla: I think working on this made me keenly aware of how important these kinds of opportunities still are. I mean, I started off our conversation saying I personally have benefited from these sorts of programmes. And however one might choose to think about it in terms of, “well, it's all a diplomatic exercise”, “oh but what about sustainability”, and those are all valid conversations to have.

I do think that for arts makers in ASEAN, who come from cultural contexts and political contexts where opportunity and the privilege to be able to show their art isn't always equal, I do think these opportunities are so important. And I think having put together this guide, it's nice to be able to

do something and then look back at your work and go, hey, you know what? I'm glad I did something that feels important.

If only for all the reasons we just talked about, which is, people know that these are available, there's actually a resource here that you can look at to see whether it would help you. And perhaps more organisations should take it upon themselves I think, to make these things more accessible.

So how it relates to my work in particular, maybe I've already benefitted enough that ~~that~~ I don't necessarily feel it may change the way I think. But I do think that if I were ever in a position to be able to help others with these opportunities, I think putting together these guides, definitely has got me thinking about, accessibility.

Putting things in a simple way, application processes being, not easy, but manageable for people who are often already juggling multiple challenges.

19:09 – 20:08

Kerrine: I think that kind of rounds up our conversations today. So we've heard quite a lot about some of the challenges that we face as a prospective grant applicant or maybe even from the shoes of a funder, we maybe might have overlooked some of these pain points that people on the ground are looking at or are facing, for example. And I think it means that there is always more work to do and there's always areas for improvement. And work in the arts is always hard work, if I were to round it off.

Sharmilla: Agreed.

Kerrine: So, thank you, Sharmilla, for joining us and sharing your insights with us today. So we have a second series of the podcast is coming up as well, where we will continue the conversation with Sharmilla on environmental sustainability and in the context of artistic mobility.

So we would love to hear your thoughts on today's discussion. So thank you for listening and we hope you have enjoyed this conversation.