Hardy, S A. 2018: "'You just have to wear it': Trafficking of metal-detected antiquities from South-East Asia". In Hufnagel, S and Moiseienko, A (Eds.). *Policing transnational crime: Law enforcement of criminal flows*. London: Routledge.

Abstract

This chapter makes a preliminary attempt to test the capacity of open-source research to generate evidence of licit and illicit metal-detecting in South-East Asia. Most evidence relates to Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand; complementary evidence comes from Brunei Darussalam, Laos, Myanmar/Burma, Singapore, Timor-Leste and Vietnam.

Using online forums and social networks, it attempts to gauge the scale of activity and to collect netnographic evidence of trafficking and mechanisms of trafficking, from looting and smuggling through to illicit sale and illicit purchase. For example, it documents networked knowledge production, for the manufacture of home-made, hand-built metal-detectors and the identification of archaeological sites.

Notably, it identifies evidence of a tendency towards online social organisation in transnational, rather than national, communities; hubs of activity within the region; and the key role of international actors in local activity. It is hoped that such empirical evidence may be useful in understanding and policing illicit flows of cultural goods.

Keywords

corruption; fraud; illicit antiquities trade; metal-detecting; online trafficking; organised crime; transnational organised crime

Introduction

Metal-detecting is the use of a metal-detector to find cultural objects. It is recognised as a hobby and a source of exercise (e.g. Westfall, 2016b, in Thailand), as well as a source of historical understanding and – since they find 'precious old objects [barangan lama yang berharga]' – a 'source of livelihood [lubuk rezeki]' (e.g. Ahmad, 2016, in Malaysia; see also, Svara, 2013, in Indonesia). However, some detectorists recite the incidental benefits with sarcasm.

Discussing his finds and their values, one local detectorist noted that silver coins were 'very rare', while gold coins were very difficult to find under 'the carpet of pull tabs' from drink cans (Borneo_Bleeper, 2016a). Then, he recalled that he detected for 'er… exercise. Yeah[,] that's it. Exercise and [to] be with nature and outdoors. That sort of thing.' Similarly, a USA-origin permanent foreign resident in Thailand mocked '[c]lassic misconceptions about metal detecting' (OctoberSix, 2009); he queried, with three winks, if others '[e]ver wonder[ed]' why detectorists persisted, if 'all' they ever found was 'pull tops and pennies'.

In Indonesia, ‘most’ known burial sites have long been looted (Heine-Geldern, 1960: 330). Thailand is notorious as a transit country, yet it is also a source country, where some sites have been ‘seriously disturbed’, if not almost completely ‘destroyed’, by looting (Miksic, 2013: 49). In Cambodia, ‘many’ sites have been ‘almost 100 percent’ looted (Phon, 2011: 131). Its archaeologists remain ‘outnumber[ed]’ by local looters, intermediaries, global collectors and their allies (Reinecke, Laychour and Sonetra, 2009: 14).

Across South-East Asia, ‘countless’ burials have been looted (Reinecke, Laychour and Sonetra, 2009: 16). As elsewhere, many archaeological sites are so thoroughly looted that they are compared with ‘lunar landscape[s]’ (Reinecke, Laychour and Sonetra, 2009: 20). While this region also encompasses Brunei Darussalam, Laos, Myanmar/Burma, Singapore, Timor-Leste and Vietnam, this chapter focuses on Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand.

Markets

In South-East Asia as elsewhere, the illicit trade is a complex sector. It encompasses features such as online trafficking of cultural objects from Cambodia (Reinecke, Laychour and Sonetra, 2009: 92 – image 77) and Timor-Leste (according to archaeologist Peter Lape, cited by SAPA and DPA, 2008); looting-to-order/theft-to-order (Gruber, 2014: 225; Hardy, 2015a: 14); “rescue”-by-purchase (Byrne, 2017; Hardy, under review); transnational organised crime, in the form of transnational looting teams (Fadli, 2014), organised crime networks (Alder, Chappell and Polk, 2009: 128-132) and organised crime groups (O’Reilly, 2007: 14); and crisis antiquities trafficking, during Indonesia’s occupation of Timor-Leste, then East Timor (McWilliam, 2007: 364n31). It has also encompassed conflict antiquities trafficking, by armed forces and paramilitary organisations from Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam (Davis, 2014; Davis and Mackenzie, 2014; Hardy, 2015b: 27-28); Indonesia (Riley, 2009); and Myanmar/Burma (according to an anonymous informant in Bangkok, cited by Alder, Chappell and Polk, 2009: 129; 122).

Historically, the dominant consumers have been foreign residents and international markets in the countries of origin of expatriate communities, who developed a desire for and access to cultural goods from South-East Asia. Amongst whom, the ‘worst offenders’ have exported their collections or stocks of high-end antiquities in diplomatic pouches and Army Post Office or Airforce Post Office (APO) mail, whilst dealers and tourists have constituted the ‘bulk market’ for mid-range and low-end antiquities (Solheim, 1973: 118).

Now, there is a global market for all kinds of looted, stolen and/or illegally exported cultural goods, such as: religious relics, which may be newly made in Thailand with looted antiquities from Cambodia (cf. Meo, 2007) or extracted through the destruction of sacred containers in Thailand by members of those faith communities (cf. Byrne, 2011: 4; 10-11); underwater cultural heritage[1] from Indonesia (Ridwan, 2015: 18), Malaysia (Huffer, 2011c) and Vietnam (Flecker, 2011: 20); and human remains, including indigenous bodies, from Cambodia (Phon, 2011: 132), Indonesia (Huffer, 2011a) and the Philippines (Chappell and Huffer, 2015: 5; Paz *et al*, 2011: 68-70).

The market is driven by established international demand and ‘flourishing’ regional demand, particularly among the political classes (Byrne, 2017). Even at the high end of the market for notoriously risky objects, the majority of objects are handled without any evidence of legal extraction and/or export (cf. Davis, 2011: 163-171). At least until recently, when Cambodia received around one million tourists, perhaps 20 per cent bought what they believed were antiquities (according to Heritage Watch, cited by Meo, 2007). Any limitation of that loss, through increased education of potential purchasers, may be cancelled out as Cambodia now receives around five million tourists per year. It is not known how much of that market is fed with fakes and forgeries.

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[1] Potential primary evidence of illicit beachcombing, riverside mudlarking and underwater detecting is exceptionally difficult to confirm, so it is excluded from detailed review.

The market for cultural objects from across South-East Asia does absorb fakes and forgeries, though. They are produced by a variety of actors in a range of places, from looters (e.g. in Indonesia, cf. Nayati, 2005: 260), to traffickers/dealers (e.g. in Thailand, cf. Mackenzie and Davis, 2014: 734-735). Sometimes, they are handled by the highest end of organised crime (e.g. in Thailand, cf. Bangkok Post, 2015).

The supply chain includes a boutique trade in unprovenanced antiquities from and through Thailand, where they are advertised without prices and tend not to be displayed online (Huffer, 2010a). Both in Bangkok, Thailand and Singapore, 'many' galleries have fundamentally sustained themselves with face-to-face, telephone and/or e-mail orders for antiquities from Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar/Burma, Thailand, Vietnam and elsewhere across South-East Asia (Huffer, 2010b; see also Lee, 2004: 244). This suggests (significant, if not exclusive) trading within a network of acquaintances, which is larger than it publicly appears. Antiquities dealers in market countries advertise that they are their own 'source[s]', that they are 'smuggl[ing]' their stock direct from Indonesia in shipments of legal commodities (in Sweden in 1999, paraphrased by Lundén, 2004: 211; more recently, in marginally more discreet terms, antiquities dealers in France have intimated to the author that they source their stocks of fragmentary religious statuary through seasonal visits to various countries in Asia).

The market is underpinned by local poverty and/or precarity (Phon, 2011: 132). From Cambodia (where up to 3,000 looters may harvest one site, cf. Vink, 2006, and where at least some use detectors, cf. Huffer, 2009: 95) to Indonesia (cf. Adi, 2017; Renaldi, 2017), poor part-time treasure-hunters, who cannot afford to buy archaeologically-rich land, rent land. They engage in "tenant looting", often as a 'sideline [sampingan]' to tenant farming (Irwanto, 2017), a 'supplementary livelihood [pencaharian tambahan]' (according to eyewitness Hadi Marsuki, cited by Fanani, 2016). Such unprofessional extraction of cultural objects can be dangerous. For example, two treasure-hunters in Brunei were asphyxiated to death when their looting tunnel filled with the gas from their water pump (Clare Cinderella, 2014).

Method

Searches

Google Scholar was searched for 'antiquities' and 'looting' plus 'territory name' in English. Facebook Groups, Facebook Pages, Google Scholar and Google Web were searched for "metal detecting" or "treasure hunting" plus 'territory name' in English. Facebook Groups, Facebook Pages and (albeit cursorily) Google Web were searched for 'metal' and 'detecting' plus 'territory name', then 'treasure' and 'hunting' plus 'territory name', in Filipino, Indonesian, Javanese, Khmer, Lao, Malay, Myanmar/Burmese, Sundanese, Thai and Vietnamese. To preclude results about security, 'forum' was added to Google Web searches.

Facebook People was searched for ‘metal detector’ in English, Filipino, Indonesian, Javanese, Khmer, Lao, Malay, Myanmar/Burmese, Sundanese, Thai and Vietnamese.

Evidence

Internet access is available to 83.5 per cent in Thailand, 81.2 per cent in Singapore, 78.8 per cent in Malaysia, 75.0 per cent in Brunei Darussalam, 67.1 per cent in Vietnam, 55.5 per cent in the Philippines, 50.4 per cent in Indonesia, 27.5 per cent in Timor-Leste, 25.6 per cent in Cambodia, 25.1 per cent in Myanmar/Burma and 21.9 per cent in Laos (MMG, 2017, as of 30th June 2017). This limits the potential for evidence, partly because detectorists without internet access cannot leave an electronic paper trail, partly because detectorists with internet access either do not gain sufficient benefit to engage in online social organisation or have leapfrogged “traditional” online organisation and immediately adopted encrypted or otherwise private online communications.

Particularly with open-ended queries, almost all results were irrelevant. For example, Facebook presented 7 relevant results out of around 895 (0.78 per cent) for metal+detecting+Vietnam. Augmenting searches with user-generated keywords from secondary sources, more primary sources were identified, such as videos of team hunting in Malaysia. When results were ambiguous, they were excluded. Still, sometimes, reviews of administrators and moderators’ memberships of other social networks confirmed that otherwise ambiguous “treasure-hunting” communities were indeed metal-detecting communities.

Caution

It is difficult to use metal-detector market data, which is distorted by local poverty and the use of hand-built or otherwise low-cost, locally-manufactured machines. For example, in Indonesia, members of online communities teach each other how to manufacture home-made, hand-built metal-detectors (e.g. mhadi6, 2014).

It can be difficult to use automatically-generated data from online communities. For instance, in Vietnam, it is known that archaeological sites are looted with ‘ex-army metal detectors’ (Glover, 2015: 243) – probably mine-detectors – and imported metal-detectors (Huffer and Chappell, 2015: 273). Yet there were only two identifiable communities. The larger one had around 59 fans (MDVKLMD, n.d., as of 6th February 2018; statistics for all cited online communities were checked on this date). This probably indicates the scale of social networking by metal-detectorists, rather than the scale of metal-detecting.

In Myanmar/Burma, the exclusive authorised dealer of Minelab metal-detectors had around 12,084 fans (Minelab Myanmar, n.d.). While they might include few corporate countermine and security clients and relatively few artisanal miners/mineral prospectors, they might include significant numbers of mine-detectorists, so the apparent size of the detecting community might be significantly distorted. Since there was almost no other evidence of online organisation of metal-detecting of cultural objects at all – the other two identifiable communities each had around 3 members (Metal Detect Myanmar, n.d.; Metal Detecting MYANMAR, n.d.) – it is prudent to disregard the one distant outlier.

At the same time, in Malaysia, there appeared to be four accounts for one authorised but not exclusive dealer: Garrett Malaysia Metal Detector (n.d.), which had around 44 fans; Malaysia Garrett Metal Detector (n.d.), which had around 443 members; Garrett Metal

Detector and Accessories (n.d.), which had around 557 fans; and Malaysia Garrett Metal Detector Hobby Division (n.d.), which had around 1,913 fans. These highlight that social networks may be larger than they appear: first, due to the visibility and distinguishability of communities during data collection; and, second, due to the distribution of the same communities among different congregations.

Cambodia

Looting used to be a primarily opportunistic supplementary activity, where people (commonly, farmers) extracted cultural assets when they were exposed. It has become a significantly (semi-)professionalised activity, where seasonal antiquities diggers, full-time treasure-hunters and organised crime groups use mine-detectors in order to expose cultural assets (O'Reilly, 2007: 13-14). While there is little detailed or regular documentation of the use of metal-detectors by antiquities looters in Cambodia, it is unlikely to be a coincidence that, through the 2000s, there was a 'marked increase' in the looting of 'metal age burial site[s]' (Phon, 2011: 131). Some places are mostly looted by local people (cf. Chan, 2011: 119). Yet at least organised looting is 'mostly' directed 'by high-ranking military officials who cannot be effectively stopped' (according to an archaeological scholar, former politician and former member of the Constitutional Council, Son, 2011: 95; cf. O'Reilly, 2007: 13).

There was extremely little evidence of online social organisation by local detectorists, apart from a friendless personal account for a local individual (Cambodia Treasure Hunter, n.d.). There was some evidence of online social organisation by international metal-detecting tourists. For instance, a temporary foreign resident (seemingly, from Canada) asked an international metal-detecting forum for recommendations of targets such as "ruins" and "temples" in Cambodia and Vietnam (Thaddeus, 2018). Other members provided old maps that marked plantations, which would be 'loaded with cultural relics' (P. Allen, 2018a); suggested visits to old villages, where elders might exchange information for a 'gift' of 'Bottled Water or Oranges, sometimes even Tobacco' (P. Allen, 2018b); and linked to news reports of archaeological discoveries, which had been archived by members of the SouthEast Asian Treasure Connection Forum (grantler, 2018).

Indonesia

In Indonesia, the market-driven nature of looting is starkly visible. Waves of objects have reached the market, as first collectors incentivised extraction directly, then dealers learned what looters had been discarding and explained that those things could be sold too (Nayati, 2005: 281-284; see also Francis, 1991: 218).

Much looting may involve seasonal antiquities diggers and full-time treasure-hunters (Renaldi, 2017). Even without explicit confirmation, metal-detecting is suggested by the fact that 'they only dig' 30 centimetres down (according to local eyewitness Handoyo, cited by Adi, 2017). Some looting seems more professional, as outsiders target sites and sometimes dig 80 centimetres down; such operations have sometimes been 'chased… out of town' by armed 'mob[s]' (Bulbeck, 2013: 178). And some looting seems to constitute organised cultural property crime: it is conducted by territorially-bounded groups, with leaders of whom local communities are 'afraid' (Nayati, 2005: 262; see also 260n6).

There is ‘Team Hunting’ by local detectorists (e.g. Sikumbang, 2016); metal-detecting by permanent foreign residents (e.g. Virgoez, 2015); provision of commercial metal-detecting services (e.g. Chandra, 2017); and metal-detecting by teams of foreign detectorists and local guides (e.g. Toppi, 2014). Some transnational teams ethically refuse to metal-detect on or around religious sites. For instance, on arriving at a temple, one withdrew to mudlarking: ‘I don’t want to find something around the temple; I don’t want to do something like this’ (Toppi, 2014: 0h28m28s). However, they still seek ‘treasure’ (Toppi, 2015).

There are numerous online communities for Indonesia. Two of the larger networks are Metal Detektor Indonesia (n.d.), which has around 2,148 fans, and Minelab Indonesia (n.d.), which has around 2,271 fans. Online social organisation is highly varied. Some local non-detectorists make contact with foreign detectorists when they post YouTube videos, then arrange to act as guides to ‘the location[s] of the oldest sites’ (Adi, 2015).

Malaysia

Metal-detecting for cultural objects only became established in Malaysia in the 2000s, after the state recovered ‘several historical artifacts’ in the old city of Malacca and thereby incidentally demonstrated the potential gains from the practice (Lim, 2009). It is undertaken by individuals and groups, who ‘usually [lazimnya]’ do it on the weekend; some have ‘traveled throughout the country [mengembara ke serata negara]’ (Ahmad, 2016).

As metal-detectors have become ‘easily obtained and cheap [senang diperoleh dan murah]’, metal-detecting for ancient objects has become a ‘craze [kegilaan]’ (JWNKPKM, 2016). Since the National Heritage Department does ‘not have enough’ capacity to enforce the law, there is now ‘rampant buying and selling of artefacts’ (Star, 2013), which have been found by illicit detecting (according to a pseudonymous numismatist, gila lunatic, 2013).

One local metal-detectorist did not know of ‘any forum specifically for MD in malaysia [*sic*]’; rather, they had ‘active group[s] in FB [Facebook]’, where there was a ‘lot of sharing’ (Bujuk, 2013). Another had identified ‘some’ Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups, ‘but nothing as organized or formal as in the UK or the US’ (Borneo_Bleeper, 2016b; see also rvn_roy, 2016).

In fact, there are numerous online communities for Malaysia and local detectorists use international forums as well: novice detectorists in Malaysia learn from experienced detectorists around the world (e.g. discussion under Borneo_Bleeper, 2015); experienced detectorists share knowledge (e.g. Knight, 2016, who discusses his “part-time job”); and they form temporary transnational partnerships (e.g. discussion under zono, 2011), even local partnerships (e.g. discussion under kentkoh, 2012; Naughty_Randy, 2013).

Two of the larger networks are Metal Detector Junkies Malaysia (n.d.), who have around 3,562 fans in their community, and the dealer Nusantara Metal Detectorist (NMD, n.d.), who has around 3,626 fans. Detectorists also trade metal-detectors and metal-detected cultural goods, and promote specialist metal-detecting pages and groups, elsewhere (e.g. in a group for buying, selling and supplying historic coins, banknotes and stamps, cf. SLDKLSLMMM, n.d., which has around 190,728 members). Some metal-detected cultural objects are auctioned via blogs in collaboration with metal-detector dealers (e.g. Al Adil, 2015).

The Philippines

The Philippines are a target not only for a wide variety of markets, but also of a wide variety of cultural property criminals, competent and incompetent. For instance, treasure-hunters from the country and around the world persist in seeking “the Yamashita Treasure”, (General Tomoyuki) “Yamashita’s Gold” (Huffer, 2011b), a supposed stash of cultural property, religious objects and mineral assets that were plundered during the Asia-Pacific War, in Operation Golden Lily, under the direction of Japan’s imperial family and Yakuza organised crime syndicates.

More grimly, in order to satisfy an ongoing demand of descendants to exhume and repatriate the bodies of missing persons of the Japanese armed forces from that war, local guides have repeatedly tricked descendants into removing ancient human remains (according to a research associate at the National Museum of the Philippines, Victor Paz, 11th May 2011, cited by Paz *et al*, 2011: 68-70). Indeed, it is suspected that Filipino citizens’ poverty and Japanese dealers’ ‘standing offer for bones’ have combined to produce ‘probab[ly]’ more looting than ‘pot-hunting or Yamashita treasure hunting’ (according to Victor Paz, 11th May 2011, cited by Paz et al, 2011: 70). At the same time, it appears that consumers who want ancient human remains have been tricked into buying (parts of) the bodies of missing persons (Chappell and Huffer, 2015: 5).

Local detectorists, foreign resident detectorists and foreign detecting tourists find each other in international online forums (e.g. discussion under wreckrat, 2011), as well as local social networks. There are commercial metal-detecting services, for rental of equipment through international online forums (e.g. Goldenboy, 2009), as well as contracting of detectorists through local social networks (e.g. GMDSPTH, n.d.); and guides, consultants and brokers for treasure-hunters (e.g. Gold Treasure Hunter Philippines, n.d.; see also ncauclair, 2017b). Foreign residents have been detecting in the Philippines since 1982 at the latest (bobthpi, 2009) and continue to be interested (e.g. long-dive, 2013). Some seek Yamashita’s gold, yet find militaria and human remains from the Asia-Pacific War (e.g. ncauclair, 2017a).

There are many online communities for treasure-hunters in the Philippines. The seemingly largest social network has about 17,210 members (‘the Japanese Hidden Treasure’ (Philippines Treasure Hunter’s Group), n.d.). Yet that and some other networks serve participants who are interested in *Yamashita* treasure-hunting. Although many participants will have engaged in metal-detecting for (other) cultural objects, those networks do encompass conspiracy theorists or pseudoarchaeologists and dowsers as well as detectorists. So, it is prudent to discount those numbers. The largest network for metal-detectorists of cultural objects, which does not express an interest in Yamashita treasure-hunting, has around 4,291 members (Philippine Treasure Hunters, n.d.).

Thailand

There is very little evidence of detecting in Thailand, though there is testimony to underwater detecting by locals (cf. Westfall, 2016a). Seemingly permanent foreign residents have been detecting, and finding antiquities such as ‘amulets and rings’, since the 1990s at the latest (NickJ, 2016). At least sometimes co-operating, they go beachcombing, too, using smartphone apps to monitor the tides for optimal detecting conditions (e.g. Burford, 2016a). Though unsurprising, this does reinforce the position that high tech is now basic tech. Plus, Japanese metal-detecting tourists illicitly search for militaria from the Asia-Pacific War (Chongcharoen, 2014).

One local business, Underground Metal Detector, has around 2,806 fans (Kherụ̀xng trwc cạb loh̄a t̂idin, n.d.a). However, it is not clear whether the business sells devices or contracts services. Anyway, its reliability might be doubted, as it has almost no content and has engaged in almost no public interaction.

Still, Underground Metal Detector's personal account, which has far more content and has engaged in far more interactions, has around 3,607 friends (Kherụ̀xng trwc cạb loh̄a t̂idin, n.d.b). Moreover, identifiable members of the business community are friends of the personal account. Since Facebook users have a mean average of perhaps 338 friends (Smith, 2014), or perhaps 183 friends for business users and 155 friends for social users (while natural social networks are limited to around 150, cf. Dunbar, 2016: 2-3), this is extremely unlikely to be a personal social network. Furthermore, numerous people sell amulets and jewellery through personal Facebook accounts, so a commercial "personal" account is not abnormal. Yet, this is one online community in two congregations, which cannot corroborate each other.

The other four identifiable communities only have around 162 fans (Siam Metal Detectors, n.d.), 5 members (Khorng ngān kherụ̀xng trwc cạb loh̄a, n.d.), 5 members (Metal Detect Thailand, n.d.) or 3 members (Trwc cạb loh̄a d̂wy khlụ̀n khwāmt̄hì, n.d.). So, it is prudent to discount the distant outlier.

Discussion

National communities and transnational communities

National communities:

As noted, when trying to estimate the scale of activity, it is prudent to discount automatically-generated statistics from online communities that constitute distant outliers. If nothing else, there is evidence of systematic insertion of fake accounts into metal-detecting communities elsewhere (cf. Hardy, forthcoming b). It is also prudent to discount tiny, isolated networks, which are probably representative of the scale of social networking rather than metal-detecting.

By analogy with the secure numbers of identifiable communities, in the light of evidence that perhaps only 93.42 per cent of online detectorists are active detectorists (from an online metal-detecting community manager elsewhere, cf. Marc, 2004), it is possible to infer that there are at least 2,122 in Indonesia, 3,387 in Malaysia and 4,009 in the Philippines or 9,518 across South-East Asia. On top of testimony from detectorists that online communities in general are unrepresentatively rare and small in South-East Asia, there is evidence that national communities in particular are unrepresentative, because detectorists in South-East Asia tend to participate in transnational communities.

Transnational communities:

All of these territories contain communities of various national languages, plus mutually-intelligible regional languages such as Indonesian/Malay/Malaysian, as well as speakers of various international languages. It is difficult to infer anything from the language factor, but it is likely to limit the potential for online social organisation and the breadth of local-language expertise. The existence of regional languages (and the regional international language, English) may foster the formation of regional communities.

The transnational networks are difficult to assess. As well as local citizens, the groups encompass: permanent foreign residents, in the form of migrant workers (particularly middle-class migrant workers, who generally distinguish themselves as expatriates or expats); permanent or intermittent foreign residents, in the form of expatriate retirees; longer-term yet still temporary or intermittent migrant workers; and intermittent foreign visitors, in the form of shorter-term migrant workers, such as precarious “flexpatriates”, and tourists. Moreover, some local citizens sometimes use foreign names for international interaction (e.g. Sharil in Malaysia, cf. steven_jb2003, 2012).

The only identifiable regional online forum is Southeast Asian Treasure Connection. TSEATC (n.d.) is administered from the USA and has about 972 members, who operate across Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam (plus Bangladesh, China, Japan, Papua New Guinea and Taiwan).

With regard to larger regional communities, Metal Detecting Thailand and Global Diggers is administered from Thailand, Russia and the United States (as well as moderated from Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, Estonia and the United Kingdom); its Facebook page has around 1,934 fans (n.d.a) and its Facebook group has around 2,011 members (n.d.b), who operate around the world. The Southeast Asian Treasure Hunters Society (n.d.) was formerly administered from the Philippines, yet is currently administered from Saudi Arabia; it has about 2,310 members.

With regard to the largest regional community, MDFanatic (n.d.a) is a detector dealer and an online resource for ‘many metal detecting hobbyists, archaeological enthusiasts and treasure hunters in Asia’ (n.d.a), which is administered from Singapore. MDFanatic has an online forum for knowledge-sharing, which has about 78 members (n.d.b); a social network for discussion, which has around 497 members (n.d.c); and a social network for news, which has about 52,558 fans (n.d.d). According to the same assessment of online detectorists as for the national communities, it is possible to infer that there are at least 49,100 active detectorists across South-East Asia.

While all of this evidence is *somewhat* skewed due to the linguistic restrictions on searches, it is notable that, *even in social networks that spanned the continent and had non-regional co-administrators*, all of the regional (co-)administrators were from Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. This reinforces the impression that they are genuine hubs of activity. It may reflect the exceptional scale of collecting in precisely those four countries (cf. Byrne, 2017). It may also reflect (and be corroborated by) the numbers and types of foreign residents and foreign visitors, hence the apparent concentrations in Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, which have popular tourist economies; and Singapore, which has a very internationalised economy.

Intensive versus extensive data analysis:

It has been argued that quantitative analysis should be restricted to intensive analysis of online forums (and discussion boards or bulletin boards, cf. Karl, forthcoming, p. 3n2), rather than extensive analysis of online forums, social networks and other empirical indicators (e.g. Hardy, 2017). As evidenced by the size of the largest regional social network, which comprises around 52,558 fans, even extensive analysis of national data would manifestly under-represent the scale of activity in South-East Asia. Moreover, if the largest identifiable regional online forum was accepted as representative of the detecting population, those 972 members would under-represent activity by perhaps around 98.15 per cent.

Metal salvage, incidental finds and emerging trade

Military scrap metal recycling is ‘an illegal trade’, but it is a livelihood for poverty-stricken people in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and elsewhere in South-East Asia (Mines Advisory Group, 2013). Scrap metal salvagers can also sell militaria, such as remains from the Vietnam War of 1955-1975, to dark heritage tourists (see discussion under MrGale, 2011).

Some treasure-hunters specifically target the ‘treasure that remains [harta karun yang masih tersisa]’ and other ‘historic objects, such as coins and spoons [benda bersejarah, seperti koin dan sendok]’ from the Asia-Pacific War of 1931-1945 (although some do not use metal-detectors, such as those who are led by expedition guide Muhlis Eso, cited by Viva, 2017, in Indonesia). To supply the same market, other enterprises sell fake objects, such as the identifying dog tags of missing persons (see discussion of Vietnam under MrGale, 2011).

Scrap metal-detecting sometimes incidentally recovers ancient objects, as does land clearance for agriculture. Naturally, finders learn that ‘prehistoric “rubbish”’ is more valuable than modern rubbish (e.g. in Vietnam, cf. Reinecke, Laychour and Sonetra, 2009: 22 – image 13; 21; 38). Such income can lift farmers from rented livestock farming to independent agriculture.

Risk and deterrence

Through ‘the largest paramilitary operations ever undertaken by the CIA’ (according to the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency, cited by Kolinovsky, 2016), Laos became ‘the most heavily bombed country’ per person ‘in history’, where 80,000,000 unexploded ordnance (UXO), specifically unexploded cluster bombs (locally, “bombi”) or bomblets from clusters, remain (Kolinovsky, 2016). The Plain of Jars has been nicknamed the ‘most dangerous archaeological site’ in the world (according to Coates, 2013: 234).

There is albeit anecdotal evidence to suggest that some detectorists may be deterred from detecting in South-East Asia due to the risk of harm from landmines (e.g. in Cambodia, cf. Nitely, 2014; Ronald, 2014; in Laos, cf. dirtymoney, 2012; in Vietnam, cf. Griff94, 2011). Still, some are not deterred (e.g. in Laos, cf. MRSEA, 2012; Rockhunter62, 2017), including families of missing persons from the Vietnam War, who metal-detect for evidence that indicates the locations of human remains (e.g. Turner, 2015).

The rule of law and corruption

In Indonesia, ‘many of the political and business elite’ are implicated in embezzlement or other forms of corruption; it penetrates so deeply and reaches so high that ‘factions’ within the police wrangle over the cost-benefit analysis of anti-corruption action (Witular and Aritonang, 2016). Naturally, such wrangling both within law enforcement agencies and between law enforcement agencies and other institutions of the state, as well as the corruption itself, affect the policing of the illicit trade.

While ‘hundreds of millions of dollars’ in cultural goods have been “salvaged” from shipwrecks, few pieces of underwater cultural heritage have been retained in Indonesia and only a few million dollars have been paid into the public purse, as the “salvagers” bribe senior government officials to enable export (according to a senior government official and an investigating police officer, cited by Khalik, 2006). There is still a sheer ‘lack of law enforcement’ capacity to combat underwater looting (Ridwan, 2015: 18).

An archaeology student and museum guide, “Amber” Andrea Amborowatiningsih, identified suspect objects. Duly alerted, archaeologist Lambang Babar Purnomo tried to investigate years of thefts of artefacts from Radya Pustaka Museum and the concealment of those thefts through the forgery of substitutes. On 9th February 2008, Lambang was found dead, assassinated.

Museum director Mbah Hadi[2], two other museum workers and art dealer Heru Suryanto confessed to stealing statues and replacing them with replicas. South-East Asian art consultant Hugo Kreijger insisted that he then sold the objects to oil tycoon Hashim Djojohadikusumo, who had family connections to the military and political elite, in good faith as to their legality (Bangkok Post, 2008; Forbes and Rompies, 2008). Subsequently, there were more theft-and-susbstitutions (Ayuningtyas, 2014). No-one was convicted of the murder.

The rule of law and evasion

While the rule of law is manifestly insecure in many states in the global south/east, the negotiation of the implementation of law is a complex affair in every society. There is a pervasive Western perception of non-Western states as unmanageably brutal and/or unremittingly corrupt, which is particularly visible in the discussions of online communities for detectorists in the West. Yet detectorists in the global south/east commonly manage to evade punishment for (or even disruption of) illegal activity, which typically relies on evading rather than bribing law enforcement agents. For instance, one detectorist in Malaysia, who gave his full name and other identifying details, observed that ‘some acts [beberapa akta]’ of law were ‘not a barrier [bukan penghalang]’ to activity, because ‘the responsible party has never made any effort to find or protect the treasures, which are quite valuable [pihak yang bertanggungjawab tidak pernah menampakan usaha untuk mencari atau melindungi khazanah yang cukup bernilai]’ (cited by Ahmad, 2016).

To establish an ‘alibi’ for treasure-hunting in the Philippines, one detectorist explained, ‘you need to buy the land, lease it or put some poverty alleviation project’ on it (indiana, 2009). With regard to exporting finds from source countries, discussing Thailand, one foreign forum member outside Thailand ‘knew someone who detected in other country’s [*sic* – countries], [who] said he had to wear it on his person to get it out of the country, in other words if you fing [*sic* – find] 20 gold rings[,] put them on your fingers and toes, a gold bar should go on a chain around your neck, if you have any piercings put them to use too. you just have to wear it’ (zman, 2004). He did aver ‘no artifact’s [*sic* – artifacts] that wont [*sic* – won’t] fly with customs, or the forign goverment [*sic* – foreign government]’ (zman, 2004). However, that would only restrict illicit detectorists where customs officials were sufficiently trained that they could identify ornamental antiquities and distinguish between antiquities and replicas or other fakes.

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[2] Mbah Hadi is apparently an alias. His given name has variously been printed as Kanjeng Raden Haryo Darmodipuro (K. R. H. Darmodipuro), Kanjeng Raden Haryo Tumenggung Darmodipuro (K. R. H. T. Darmodipuro) and Suhadi Darmodipuro.

Evidently, in Asia, detectorists work ‘independently’ and ‘highly secretive[ly]’; ‘professionals’ deny their business; experienced detectorists even withhold knowledge from novice detectorists (Lim, 2009). One permanent foreign resident implied that appeals for information or collaboration in Thailand would provoke ‘very little’ response (impulse, 2016).

As observed in Malaysia, there is a fear of losing access to potential goods, by sharing access to “productive” sites or otherwise enabling competitors to extract more resources. Above and beyond this (more general phenomenon of) “kiasuism”, there is a fear of losing possession of cultural objects that have been metal-detected. If they share self-incriminating evidence, ‘the Government will seize’ the proceeds of crime (according to detectorist Saiful Ahmad, cited by Lim, 2009).

The differences between the detecting cultures and public cultures of Europe and Asia seem real and visible. In Eastern Europe, detectorists publicly discuss ‘how to get around the law’; media advise detectorists ‘how’ to commit a crime yet ‘not [to] get thrown in prison’ (cf. Hardy, forthcoming a). In South-East Asia, detectorists are quiet or silent online; media publish albeit pixelated photographs of detectorists at protected sites (e.g. Sarawak Edition, 2016, in Malaysia) and advise detectorists not to commit a crime ‘unless’ they want ‘downtime in a jail cell’ (Lim, 2009, in Malaysia). Even some foreign detectorists have ‘warned’ not to ‘try it inland’, due to the risk of detention ‘in the local lock-up [police custody/prison]’ (Hassell, 2010, in Indonesia).

Conclusion

In conjunction with the tapping of open-source information and formation of partnerships in online forums elsewhere, online social organisation and networked knowledge production by detectorists in regional networks in South-East Asia has produced a capacity that may rival national networks in Europe and North America. Hopefully, the tapping of this information by anti-trafficking workers may assist in understanding and policing illicit flows of cultural goods.

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