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Emic–Etic Perspectives on Southeast Asian Cultural Attitudes Surrounding Human Remains

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ABSTRACT

Community ethics and cultural attitudes vary across contexts in which professionals work with human remains. Southeast Asia is home to millions; thus, there are challenges when attempting to understand and articulate the diversity in cultures, ideologies, and ethics surrounding the dead. Our semi-autoethnographic and qualitative research addresses these challenges through a critical self-examination of how we conduct our work with human remains, engaging with diverse communities around us. Our approach combines insights from osteologists, which provide both culturally informed personal perspectives (emic) and professional views of ethical issues surrounding work with human remains (etic). Thematic analysis returned three main themes: (a) we in Southeast Asia, who work directly with the dead, are influenced heavily by the social and ideological norms we operate within; (b) community attitudes towards our professions are diverse and interesting to consider in and of themselves; (c) it is important to put efforts into public engagement on science and ethics, particularly with local community members and government authorities, and influence others in society to adopt or further a dynamic, non-monolithic culture of respect towards human remains. We hope this study adds to the growing literature on ethics in the biological, archaeological, and forensic sciences.

All co-authors listed during final submission contributed equally.

1 | Cultures, Ideologies and Ethics Surrounding the Dead

When considering the ethics of working with human remains in Southeast Asia, it is important to consider both the perspectives of osteologists as community members (the *emic* perspective) and as scientists/experts (the *etic* perspective). By combining insights from the same experts who live within Southeast Asian communities and study/manage/interact with various stakeholders, *emic* and *etic* observations together provide rich ethical perspectives (see Barnard and Spencer 1996). Throughout human evolution, people have negotiated their relationships with those no longer living and what remains of the deceased. These negotiations are conducted by many across different sectors of historical and contemporary societies, from spiritual leaders to research scholars, from medical physicians to artists, and from existential philosophers to descendant communities. What is only natural is the great cultural and spiritual variation surrounding how various societies, individuals, and even scholars contend with (or "make sense of") these phenomena of dying, death, and the dead. In this article, we explore the cultural settings within which professionals work directly with human remains in Southeast Asia. We consider what our relationships are to the work and the broader communities we are accountable to.

2 | Methodology

We aimed to survey current community attitudes in Southeast Asia towards our professions and human remains, and reflect on how we adapt our ethical approaches to various cultural contexts. Our roles in society are complex, often comprising multiple engagements with human remains. Our lived realities and philosophies can be reflected through direct interviews or questionnaire data. A questionnaire was crafted and strategically distributed to peers across known networks occupying a range of scientific roles in Southeast Asia involving direct contact with human remains (see Supporting Information for the professional roles of each co-author (S1) and our questionnaire prompts (S2)). Because of our "insider" experiences working as specialists, our qualitative data provide emic perspectives on ethics in their contexts.

The questions were designed with a view to capture (a) any aspects of community attitudes the respondent might be perceptive to and affected by, and (b) how practitioners approach community/public engagement in their local contexts. However, not all of us interact with these communities in the same fashion, nor let societal attitudes affect our methods and practices to the same extent. An option was kept to answer only some questions that dealt with these topics, and no respondent was obliged to answer all. Our names and associations are included in our research, but all were afforded the opportunity to answer anonymously to their own level of comfort. The questions were designed towards anyone as long as they had experience working with human remains.

The raw data from 18 respondents were coded and grouped into themes *independently* by MR and TH. Coding involved a close reading of the raw data and identifying meaningful keywords or phrases (*apprehension*, *ritual*, *spirituality*, *Islam*, *locals*, and *community engagement*). Our inductive approach to theming (see Braun and Clarke 2006) involved grouping these indexed codes into wider patterns that hold cohesive analytical value for understanding community ethics in the Southeast Asian contexts (e.g., "collections," "institutions," "legacy," "material," "provenance," "temporal context," and "theft" were grouped into the theme "institutional contexts"). Codes and themes from each author were compared before committing to our final list of key themes. These themes also constitute the subheadings of this article. Following a similar format used by Tallman et al. (2022), testimonials are listed under each section featuring opinions from different co-authors. Every co-author consented to use their full names and association(s) when quoted, offering qualitative data and a range of individual perspectives. We believe Southeast Asia is an imagined community that has no hard borders in time and space, and our scientific community is an eclectic mix of workers and enthusiasts who all share ethical concerns. These shared perspectives transcend career stage or academic field.

3 | Contexts of Ethics

Ethical questions, decisions, and dilemmas arise within different professional contexts. Our group of specialists and students work with and within museums, research centers, universities, hospitals, cemeteries, and religious institutions. Some of our projects and initiatives are closely monitored and evaluated by government offices, nonprofit organizations, hospital authorities, or faith-based and spiritual leaders. Archaeological, forensic, medical, and anthropological research performed by academics is funded—either by our institutions, national-level agencies, or external foundations and granting bodies. Where we work and how we are afforded opportunities to perform such work influences how we have become accustomed to treating human remains.

The bodies we interact with derive from a great variety of contexts too (see Table S1). For our (bio)archaeologists, our skeletal collections derive from ancient time periods millennia-old as well as more recent historical contexts. In forensic anthropology, the human remains that come under our care are either procedural cases requiring postmortem investigation or cases where cemetery leases expire (then making disinterment, transportation, and/or cremation necessary). For us who manage access to collections, we are ultimately responsible for decisions surrounding human remains under our curatorship. These could be for the purposes of preservation, scientific study, forensic investigation, returning remains to families, repatriating bodies back to communities, or giving community members assurance that their dead are being respectfully looked after by a professional.

In some of our contexts, theories in necropolitics are informative. Necropolitics is a sociopolitical theory from Cameroonian and political theorist Achille Mbembe (2019), highlighting how the body is viewed after an individual's death, and how power dynamics still follow with how human remains are manipulated and managed. Human remains—and the ideological ideas surrounding them—are further taken into other spaces

and curated by qualified authorities (i.e., cemetery workers, traditional shamans, museum curators, and disaster relief management teams). Like these professions, our jobs as anatomists, anthropologists, and archaeologists revolve around promoting certain ideas surrounding such remains and emphasizing procedures and protocols centered upon how the physical body should be handled. Some of us even participate in what Mbembe (2019) terms "deathworlds," where vast numbers of skeletons exist in the aftermath of mass genocide events and extrajudicial killings. In Southeast Asia, we are agents in necropolitics.

3.1 | Testimonials

> I had the opportunity to work with human skeletal remains associated with the Khmer Rouge genocide at the Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre, and also collected data on prehistoric human skeletal remains from Cambodia. The remains from the genocide were exhumed from mass graves without systematic archaeological excavation and are currently housed in the memorial stupa, a Buddhist shrine.

> In contrast, the prehistoric skeletal remains were partially recovered through scientific excavation and, in some instances, as a result of looting activities. There is a lack of formal management and protocols concerning the handling of human skeletal remains, which fall under the curatorship of the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts.

Sophorn Nhoem

> For Southeast Asia, one of the topics that should be discussed is the ethical perception towards body donation in Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia. In Islam, donating one's body for scientific research is generally considered haram (forbidden), as it is believed to be disrespectful to the body after death, reflecting the broader cultural emphasis on dignity and sanctity of the human form. This religious stance raises questions about the extent to which Muslim communities can participate in body donation programs, particularly in Muslim-majority countries.

Ker Woon Choy

> They were victims of the extrajudicial killings dubbed the 'War on Drugs' by the Duterte administration. These victims were from poor urban communities that could not afford to extend the lease at a cemetery, so they eventually had to be exhumed to free the space for the next occupant. An NGO led by a priest funds the exhumations and subsequent cremations of these victims' remains so they can be returned to their families. However, before they get cremated, they are being analyzed one last time to record injuries and understand true causes of death. For many of these victims, the death certificates state natural causes of death instead of homicide.

Edwin Miguel Anadon

> For my dissertation research, I primarily worked with a cranial collection composed of individuals from Burma, whose remains were obtained over a century ago. The remains were acquired based on the request of early physical anthropologists in the early 1900s to study biological differences among different 'races', a popular topic of study during that period. The details of the original acquisition process are not well-documented, and therefore the provenance of the remains in the collection cannot be traced. The only detail that was published in the original article about this collection is that they originated from Moulmein, a city in southern Burma. Currently, the collection is housed in the original institution to which the remains were initially brought. In my case, the colonizer country to which the remains were brought still has authority over the collection. As a caveat, there are currently no biological anthropologists in my country, so they are also not aware of the collection I worked with. I am the first member of the diaspora (and coincidentally descendant community member) who learned about this collection. Given the current political situation and the lack of resources, there is much capacity building to be done for my country to be ready for the proper curation and storage of the remains.

Nandar Yukyi

> The archaeological human remains that I have accessed and helped curate are human remains assemblages recovered from several Philippine archaeological excavations through the years (earliest fieldwork was in 1998 onwards), currently housed in our University of the Philippines School of Archaeology (UPSA).

> Student and researcher access to these collections has always been subject to the Project leader's approval, as they are the recognized legal custodian of these collections by the National Museum of the Philippines (NM) and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA). These collections ultimately fall under the jurisdiction of the State (and hence, the National Museum), and UPSA has a longstanding Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the National Museum to temporarily store archaeological collections (including human remains). This facilitates research, as the UPSA

> contains the facilities specifically for the analysis of these archaeological remains.

> Although it is acknowledged that archaeology (as well as the collection and study of human remains, a nascent form of bioarchaeology) was first introduced in my country with a very clear colonial agenda, the current practice has notably used the methods and practices of the discipline as a way to decolonize our own past—projects led by Filipino archaeologists themselves, and integrating nuanced local perspectives in their practice and interpretations.
>
> Sarah Agatha Villaluz

> I was lucky enough to experience different educational approaches during my Master's degree [abroad], which allowed me to observe traditions in caring for human remains in 'the West' and 'East'. Beyond that, my upbringing as an Indonesian and my experiences within local communities have shaped my ethical approach. In Indonesia, human remains are often treated as sacred, and this cultural sensitivity requires extra care and respect. Over the years, local communities have been my most valuable teachers. Our interactions have taught me the importance of humility, collaboration, and adaptability in ensuring that my work aligns with the values and expectations of the communities I serve.
>
> Pratiwi Budi Amani Yuwono

> During philosophy classes as an undergraduate, we extensively studied concepts of morality, philosophical ethics, and the law. This shaped and framed my understanding of significant issues within anthropology and archaeology. The second pillar of my ethical background derives from later training in forensic anthropology, with lectures, practical labs, and internship opportunities in various medico-legal contexts. These experiences put every theory into practice, allowing me to apply ethics to real-world situations.
>
> Winsome Hin Shin Lee

> From my experience studying at university and several courses related to human remains, I have learned a lot about 'do's and 'don'ts'. I consider and reflect on these 'do's and 'don'ts' from both academic and cultural perspectives. I have also learned about what constitutes ethical practice in health sciences and social humanities, which I can more or less apply to the collection of human remains too.
>
> Toetik Koesbardiati

4 | Community Attitudes in Southeast Asia

At times, we are entrusted to carry out decision-making alone, given our roles as mediators between the living and the dead. However, in many other instances, we share decision-making power with others, or may even defer to their ultimate authority over next steps. Government offices, religious bodies, and community representatives act as stewards or vanguards of *their* dead (or sometimes even *our* dead). We—the professionals—can sometimes be seen as providing a service of facilitation, especially whenever we are the first to discover human remains in any excavation settings. Deceased individuals have been considered to have their own agency in necropolitics elsewhere (cf. Agarwal 2024; Hicks 2020). We also work with/under/for members of living society. Our actions should be carefully considered, as our approach to working with remains influences how the public views us in the future, and we must minimize misconceptions.

How Southeast Asian communities view our profession is highly dependent on social norms and expectations, and varying forms of exposure to our work. For instance, who should determine whether human remains can be displayed in a museum exhibition? What do we do if a member of the public sees our career as a mere "hobby"? How do we respond when we are accused of potentially "dabbling with ghosts?" What if authorities consider some human remains more "valuable" than other collections (based on how old the remains are or if they still have soft tissue)? Community attitudes within each nation or society can vary immensely, thus complicating matters further for the ethically minded scientist. The public may witness or be exposed to our work at archaeological sites, sites undergoing forensic investigation, at universities, in museums, in hospitals or morgues, at cemeteries, and/or through traditional and/or digital media. Sometimes, we may find ourselves with supporters on one hand, but run into opposition when interfacing with other publics yet. Exposure to what we do is very important for establishing/maintaining public trust going forward.

There is great spiritual significance surrounding the dead in Southeast Asian cultures (though not always). The corporeal-material form of a person is all that exists to some people's minds, and all a person's value or individuality dissipates upon the moment of death. For others, the human remains may represent more than the individual and exist as an entity, which communities and authorities hold collective responsibility over. Important matters such as the location of final resting places lie in the collective hands of osteologists, members of the public, and faith-based communities. In some of our contexts, there is fear, apprehension, or general superstition surrounding contact with skeletal remains. Ethical practice and standards in our regions must consider these aspects of superstitiousness and spirituality.

4.1 | Testimonials

> Last year, I planned to excavate an archaeological site in Central Thailand, and the locals felt they were unhappy with my research project. So, I met with a

local community to request their approval, although the authority belongs to the Fine Arts Department. The project was cancelled, and I chose the other site that the locals consented to for my work. Consent is very important because it means respecting others involved in the project and communities, including respect for local concerns and their rights of refusal.

Naruphol Wangthongchaicharoen

In Cambodia, respect for human remains is deeply valued. Mishandling of these remains, such as posing for inappropriate photographs or sharing them on social media, is generally deemed unacceptable in Cambodian society. There is a widespread belief that working with human remains may bring misfortune. Although I do not personally adhere to religious beliefs, I make it a practice to seek permission and observe moments of silence before working on the remains, as a way of acknowledging and informing both the living and the deceased that I am studying these remains.

Sophorn Nhoem

Working with human remains is not something popular in Indonesia, though the locals near our research sites recognize us from the university. Some of them appreciate this work, especially in the context of forensics or disaster victim identification. Sometimes they ask about the experience of working with human remains. Others are indifferent, considering working with human remains just another job.

Delta Bayu Murti

Malaysian society is generally conservative, and many people may feel apprehensive about our work. Working with the deceased does not attract as much attention as professions focused on saving lives or making money, such as medicine, pharmaceutical science, law, engineering, or business. However, I believe there are individuals who appreciate and respect our work, recognizing its value in assisting the deceased and their families. However, many still tend to distance themselves from our field, and do not even want to be 'associated' with us.

Chong Chin Heo

While donated bodies will be accessed for research or education purposes, the usage of tools on it post-death can be seen as vandalism no matter how well-meaning the reason is. With superstitions being a huge part of Singaporean culture, having permission with acknowledgement from the next of kin, or a signed form from the person while they were alive, is important to ensure that the body will be registered as a 'silent teacher' deserving the utmost respect.

Wan Xian Yeo

Attitudes towards my profession are mixed. When people learn that I work with archaeological human remains, it is generally met with curiosity. During the retrieval of human remains during fieldwork, the local communities often visit us to observe. When they observe us working on exposing a burial, the most common reaction I've seen is slight discomfort (asking me if I'm scared of handling human remains). There is also relief, because we are in the process of retrieving these previously unknown burials that are often found in private property grounds. I have also encountered stories of locals conducting ground-moving activities (such as digging for a well or latrine) and accidentally coming across human remains. Often, they retrieve these remains and they turn it over to the local government officials, which are then reburied in the local public cemetery. I have noticed that there is more discomfort with the idea of living in proximity to the dead in their private living spaces.

Sarah Agatha Villaluz

Others will express apprehension towards 'ghosts,' given my proximity to human remains. They also frequently ask if I have encountered any paranormal activities in the bone collection room. This reaction probably stems from our societal attitudes towards spiritual entities, including ghosts, deities, and guardian angels, *etc*. In their perspective, when handling 'objects' that were once considered 'houses' for spirits, it is essential I approach them with patience, empathy and understanding. Many in society are unfamiliar with scientific concepts and the value of medical research. Consequently, they may react with ignorance or skepticism.

For instance, a proposed body donation processing center managed by a medical university is being considered for construction in a rural area near the local community. During a town hall meeting to discuss the potential benefits of this center for the local community, the villagers expressed their opposition to the proposal. They expressed concerns about being associated with an organization that handles human remains and feared that it would disrupt their peace and cause them to be haunted by the spirits of the donors. Ultimately, the plan to build the center was halted.

Patara Rattanachet

> In Malaysia, where the majority of the population is Muslim, it is crucial to recognize the religious and cultural differences that shape how the deceased are treated. As a Chinese person, I may not always share the same religious or cultural practices as the majority Muslim population, but I understand the importance of respecting different traditions and beliefs.
>
> Ker Woon Choy

> In Myanmar, discourse on ethical practices surrounding human remains may sound very different. Particularly with the ongoing civil war, news of inhumane bombings and attacks on civilians by the military junta is rampant. Further, the most recent earthquake of 7.7 magnitude in the country left thousands dead, whose remains could not even be properly recovered due to the lack of resources. Additionally, news of human remains in mass graves due to the lack of space and resources have circulated. In this sense, our situations present unique ethical challenges. Rather, it involves how to ethically implement burial practices of human remains with the little resources that civilians are currently given by the military dictatorship. A humanitarian crisis as such warrants discussions on ethical practices on how to deal with contemporary human remains, especially in the context of their recovery and final disposition.
>
> Nandar Yukyi

> Societal attitudes in Indonesia are not homogenous; they vary across different regions and cultural groups. While some communities may be more open to scientific study, others may prioritize traditional or spiritual considerations. As archaeologists, we must remain adaptable and respectful, ensuring that our work aligns with the values and expectations of the communities we engage with.
>
> Pratiwi Yuwono

5 | Problematizing a Universal Culture of "Respect" Towards Bodily Remains

Some sets of ethical codes/guidelines have been developed outlining different visions of ethical osteological practice. For instance, the American Anthropological Association's Commission for the Ethical Treatment of Human Remains (2024) provides extensive recommendations on issues of consent, respect, and community engagement. We agree with their assessment that "accountability, transparency, cooperation, and ethical anthropological practices must be ongoing, relational, and dynamic." However, we also cite Tarlow (2001) who thought-provokingly questions the utility and bases of ethical codes. To her, embracing the continuing dynamism of ethical engagements involves recognizing that ethical codes sometimes promote conformity, conservatism, homogeneity, and complacency, rather than ongoing reflexivity on the part of each practitioner or institution (Tarlow 2001, 254).

Indeed, we have endeavored to maintain ethical standards in ways that are highly localized, contextualized in time, and may not necessarily be covered by guidelines published elsewhere around the globe. For example, this may mean keeping human remains safe in suitable storage, laying them to rest in peace through (re)burial, having monks communicate with the spirits of the deceased before any work takes place, or cremating the remains in accordance with some cultural customs. Each of us works with remains in ways informed by pre-existing national laws or institutional guidelines (where they exist), or the cultural, organizational, or historical norms and standards we deem most applicable to a given situation. Sometimes, these do not differ much from practices or standards performed outside Southeast Asia. That said, we typically find a strong and transparent understanding between the carers of human remains, the soon-to-be-deceased, and relatives of the deceased. Collaborating with communities directly grounds our approaches. If others view the deceased as ancestor or extended kin, so must we. For at least a few of us, some intentionally and some subliminally, we have become more spiritually minded and spiritually connected through this work. Our ethical decisions are negotiated and made with community opinions taken seriously.

Many of us carry both emic/etic perspectives when working within communities. We were born in these societies, grew up here, were educated here, or have worked in different spaces. We are insiders (as Asian citizens) and outsiders to community groups (as professionals serving society in unusual capacities). Though we may be serving in the roles of Steward, Caretaker, Kindred Spirit, or Scientist, we cannot think of ourselves as Owner or Ultimate Authority. Cultural sensitivities and community involvement remain important for creating more inclusive dead-living relations. We draw inspiration from Supernant et al. (2020) who prioritize principles of care, emotion, relation, and rigor in "archaeologies of the heart." Since human remains derive from many temporal and societal contexts, and the reality is that any one of us experts could be contacted first to handle matters whatever our core training, every effort should be made to practice reflexivity and communal decision-making with relevant parties. This will ensure our strategies will align with culture-specific consent frameworks and relevant government legislation, applicable across archaeology, forensics, and the medical sciences on a case-by-case basis. It is important we work with an ethos of dynamism to promote dialogues with governments and get involved in public consultancy, rather than prescribing rigid sets of rules. We believe long-term government investment and continual interest developed through exchange benefit the sustainability of human remains work. This will ultimately increase ethical integrity concerning our work with the dead.

It is also important to adopt an internationalist or globalist mindset that respects the needs of communities, while remaining cognizant of and aiming towards international ethical dialogues. Broader global attitudes towards ethics and consent vary even more, and our engagement with others can help us contribute towards international ideals of ethical integrity. We

provide our examples of how scientific rigor, cultural diversity, and ethical responsibility can be balanced.

We hope the practice of care and respect extends to living audiences and communities too. We would like to see more welcoming to all field workers, local excavators, interested amateurs, and budding scholars in becoming osteologists. When foreign visitors work with our human remains, they must actively seek education on community attitudes and participate in local ethical discussions. It is important to promote awareness of our contributions, yet continue ethical conversations with relevant organizations, institutions, or community groups.

5.1 | Testimonials

> Community members were generally very interested in the excavations/projects and some did participate as volunteers and/or employed team members. It was not uncommon for village leaders, religious personnel, farmers/fishermen/villagers, children, snack peddlers, among others, to congregate around the sites to watch the excavation. They asked questions, told stories, and were excited to see what was coming out of the ground, especially when human remains were uncovered. The community members would sometimes proceed to discuss the meanings of the artifacts and burials among themselves and with project personnel.

> Communities expressed consent in different ways—some may be with official documents and most by participation. While an 'official' consent (*e.g.*, signed or documented) is preferred, it is key to recognize the fluid ways that consents are perceived and given. The formal consent derived from western medical fields may not and should not be the only form of consent. It is also important to be sensitive about the dynamic attitude towards the kind and extent of consent that community members express and be flexible as a project progresses.
>
> Chin-hsin Liu

> When excavating in archeological sites with local workers, I shared my professional stance and stories about human skeletons with them. I guided them in assisting me with excavation and observation tasks. I always consider local workers as my colleagues. So, they are very happy and willing to help me. They treat human skeletons with respectful attitudes and take care of them very well when I am not on site. Thus, inspiring local people and training them to become bioarchaeologists is an important endeavor for me.
>
> Minh Tran

> In my opinion, there are many current ethical issues in the world, but there are differences in each country, and we do not use the same approach to describe or solve the problems. We would like to respect others and absolutely cannot judge solely what is wrong or right or the best practice that you could do. We will have the best practices in many countries, such as the U.S. and Australia, but their contexts are different, so we must be cautious when comparing with the others.
>
> Naruphol Wangthongchaicharoen

> The donors provide 'consent' to their body, believing that it will be utilized for medical teaching and research. While the research may not always yield a scientific breakthrough, the 'consent' from the donors aligns with the Buddhist concept of selfless sacrifice, which is seen as a virtuous act that facilitates entry into heaven. Therefore, consent holds significant importance for me, as I can find contentment in my work with human remains, and I will forever be grateful for their decisions.
>
> Patara Rattanachet

> In my opinion, consent is a fundamental ethical principle in bioarchaeology. It represents permission granted by both the local communities and the relevant authorities, as they are the rightful 'guardians' of these remains. I believe that consent is not only a legal or procedural requirement but also a moral obligation to ensure that the communities' cultural heritage and values are respected.

> Moreover, I also understand respect as giving voice to their stories. By meticulously studying and accurately interpreting burial practices, health conditions and the circumstances of their death, I could only hope their stories are heard and understood. We preserve their legacy and contribute to a deeper understanding of their lives and the communities they were part of.
>
> Pratiwi Yuwono

6 | Limitations of the Study

Though questionnaire data may always be critiqued for its generalizability, we contend that this approach gets as close as possible to a holistic articulation of ethics in our context. It matters that a majority of our team are based in Asia full-time, as writing from non-Asian institutions can influence researcher viewpoints. As Kanagasabi (2023) writes: "Knowledges are not abstract constructions. They emerge from social-economic realities, embodied practices, and labour processes."

The conversation surrounding the ethical use of human remains in Southeast Asia is still nascent, because not many international journals and conferences have platformed Southeast

Asian voices on this topic. Awareness has recently been raised surrounding Asian monuments and archaeological relics, but these discussions rarely extend to the ethics surrounding human remains. Colonial-era theft of human remains was common across Southeast Asia. Ethical concerns around skeletons have been relegated to a few conference presentations (or simply do not get mentioned at all). Workshops on ethics around human remains have been nonexistent, and very few publications besides Halcrow et al. (2019) have covered this topic as it pertains to Southeast Asia. We do not have yet much discussion just among ourselves as Southeast Asians for fine-tuning our practice in ways that benefit us all scientifically and morally. We instead face foreigners taking over the ethical discussion, writing papers on ethics on our behalf, and effectively ignoring local communities' and biologists' views. This produces a paucity of understanding about what local communities are concerned about when we work with human remains. We need to expand our discourses to ensure that the future of osteological ethics contributes to, and is in communication with, local societies. This collaborative paper is our attempt to have that conversation without outsider distraction or interference, a feat that has been a long time coming.

7 | Conclusion

For us who work in this region, our engagement with local communities and their dead is embedded in—and cannot be separated from—social, cultural, and political worlds. We contend that discussions surrounding human remains in Southeast Asia should extend past the experience of "non-locals," as these works easily ignore historical context and broader sociopolitical dynamics. Beckett (2013, 167) urges us to "move away from the kind of thinking *about* others that has been central to the discipline of anthropology for centuries and … [instead] we can think *with* others." We need a more thorough interrogation of positionalities as researchers when we speak on bioethics. We implore the world to see us Southeast Asian scientists differently from the way we have been portrayed in previous academic literature. We have deep and varied opinions on the ethics of handling human remains. We value the opportunity to share with friends and colleagues worldwide how our communities see and value our work. We hope scientists visiting Southeast Asia in the future will strongly consider community contexts and plan their activities *with* our communities.

Our histories, cultures, legal policies, and scientific practices in Southeast Asia are interesting, varied and complex, and we invite all audiences to engage with us as we continue to grapple with these ourselves. We look forward to discovering where our suggestions and stories will ripple to in the vast sea of ethical discussions and scientific practices. Our discussions on community ethics will continue to grow and diversify in coming years.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our respect and gratitude towards the communities that we belong to—who nourished us and sacrificed to build up our capacities as people and as scholars with the privilege to work with human remains. We would like to thank the communities who guard the dead we study, help us navigate ethical dilemmas, help us shed light on the life histories of their (and our) dead, and continue to be important partners in collaboration.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Table S1:** Table of professional engagements with human remains of each co-author.