

PERSPECTIVES ON ASIA

Further thoughts on Asian Studies “inside-out”

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Abstract

In response to Sato and Sonoda’s “Asian Studies ‘inside out’: research agenda for the development of Global Asian Studies,” members of the Global Asias Collaborative at Rutgers University – comprised of a diverse group of scholars of Asia and the Asian diaspora located in history, literature, art history, geography, among other disciplines – offer responses to this generative prompt to remap the place and field of “Asia” in its heterogeneous and interwoven temporalities and topologies.

Keywords: Globalization; knowledge production; pluralities; temporalities; topologies; West Asia

Sato and Sonoda’s “Asian Studies ‘inside out’: research agenda for the development of Global Asian Studies” articulates an insightful and far-reaching proposal for developing Global Asian Studies, which they identify as an emerging formulation of the way Asia is studied globally and which they contrast with conventional Asian Studies. The four themes they identify in the Global Asian Studies agenda (Society to Society Movements of Ideas and Actions; Memories of Disaster and Reconciliation for the Future; Critical Junctures in Regional Histories; Teaching Global Asia) are useful in that they embody in concrete terms the concepts underpinning their plan for developing the field. Global Asias in their framing is not merely the inverse of a Universalizing Europe but actively promotes new research methodologies and seeks to create the institutional mechanisms to sustain this new approach to research in the region. Members of the Global Asias Collaborative at Rutgers University – comprised of diverse scholars of Asia and Asian diasporas located in history, literature, art history, geography, among other disciplines – offer responses to this generative prompt as we seek to remap the place and field of “Asia” in their heterogeneous and interwoven temporalities and topologies.

Overturing hierarchies of knowledge production (Johan Mathew)

The rise of China and the Asian “Tiger” economies around the turn of the twenty-first century has been intimately connected to “globalization.” The expansion and acceleration of global transportation and communication infrastructures have made possible the transformation of parts of Asia into the manufacturing center of the world. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only made apparent Asia’s centrality to global supply chains, but also how Asia can be a model for Europe and North America in confronting the problems of a modern globalized world. The intellectual production of scholars in Asia is also challenging the dominance of U.S. and European schools of thought.

And yet, Asia has its own histories of imperialism. The long history of the Japanese or Qing Empires resonates today in Delhi’s relationship with Kashmir or Jakarta’s relationship with Kalimantan. Economic forms of imperialism are present not just in the well-reported issues with China’s Belt and Road Initiative but also in Korean textile production outsourced to Bangladesh or

Japanese capital funding the Indonesian lumber industry. Anna Tsing's concept of supply chain capitalism highlights not only the ways that Asia has benefited enormously from globalization, but how the process is also experienced in a persistently differentiated and profoundly hierarchical way.¹ In political power, financial resources and even racial imagery of the hierarchical relationship between Europe and Asia is reproduced within Asia.

The imbalanced rise of Asia is reflected in the rise of Asian institutions in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings. Although these rankings bear only a vague connection to educational quality they are a reasonably good indicator of "prestige." Institutions in Japan, China, South Korea, and Singapore are well represented. Yet, no Indian institutions crack the top 100, much less those in Thailand or Tajikistan. Prestige is substantially an effect of wealth and resources: scholars at wealthier institutions have more resources to collect data or visit distant archives. A prestigious business card gains access to powerful politicians and successful business people. Wealthier countries in Asia and wealthier regions within countries receive disproportionate scholarly interest as a result. Wealthier countries are more likely to produce and disseminate data sets, digitize their archives, and in general facilitate research into their societies and histories. The presence of well-funded and well-networked institutions such as the National University of Singapore or the University of Kyoto make the prospect of multi-sited multi-archival research that much easier. Wealth powerfully shapes which parts of Asia get represented and what kinds of connections and comparisons get made.

Consequently, there is a real danger that a paradigm of Global Asias could simply reproduce the hierarchies of knowledge production that have tarnished the Western intellectual tradition. But, this is by no means inevitable. As long as these inequities are acknowledged and consciously addressed, there is every reason to believe that this intellectual project can resist the Orientalist tendency of producing knowledge to serve power. Scholars in wealthy institutions can make a self-conscious effort to share resources with colleagues elsewhere. Less prestigious institutions can often contribute quite substantial physical and human resources that are routinely undervalued. Perhaps more importantly, scholars who wield intellectual influence must forge truly collaborative scholarly relationships with colleagues at less prestigious institutions. True collaboration necessitates compromise and deference to collaborators overcoming, and indeed redefining, their status in the global hierarchy of scholarship.

One example of this effort to resist and reverse the hierarchies of knowledge production is the U.S. Social Science Research Council's Transregional Collaboratory on the Indian Ocean. This program was explicitly structured to address the potentially neo-colonial structures of trans-national research. Scholars from India, Indonesia, and Kenya have served on the committees that formulated the program and selected grantees. Front and center in the selection process was the effort to self-consciously address the ethical problems of research across the North-South divide. In spirit, Sato and Sonoda's project of Global Asias does this work of challenging the hierarchies of knowledge production. However, it is vital that the hierarchies within and beyond Asia are explicitly acknowledged and that overcoming these hierarchies is central to the collaborations that constitute Global Asias.

Thinking through the global to post-global (Paul Schalow)

It is widely accepted that strong Asian economies and particularly the Chinese economy are crucial to what has brought us to a global turn in Asian Studies. To me what is interesting is how the rise of China remaps the Global North/Global South framework. In the UN formulation of Global South-South cooperation, China is understood politically as a developing economy, but economists increasingly view it as a developed economy and situate China in the Global North along with Japan, South Korea, and Australia. Mexico is undergoing a similar shift as its economy matures. China's shift in status poses interesting problems for whether we view China's 2013 Belt and Road initiative (BRI), 2016 Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and related foreign aid especially to Africa and South America as representing a new non-exploitative model of "Global South-South

¹Tsing 2009.

cooperation” or whether we view it as China’s integration into an existing corporate model of “Global North” exploiting the “Global South.” If we decide that Global Asian Studies is a product of the rise in Asian economies based on the exploitation of Asian resources and labor, and a furthering of the divide between rich and poor nations and social classes, then it adds a cautionary note to our celebration of Asia’s strong economies.

As the authors argue, it is important that Asian voices are the ones to define and discuss the issues confronting Asia. At the same time, there is a tension in the idea of Asian “ownership” between political influence by local governments wishing to control the conversation and the independence of scholarly inquiry. For example, Confucius Institutes were part of China’s effort to increase China’s international presence, but they came with restrictions on airing of taboo topics that caused soul-searching in the foreign universities who hosted the Institutes over the issue of academic freedom. The U.S. Congress stepped in to impose federal funding restrictions on universities with Confucius Institutes due to fears of propaganda and spying. Similar nationalistic institutions can be found everywhere, of course. My concern is that if the increase in Asian voices amounts to an increase in public relations platforms for governments to place national interests on a global stage, we should be cautious about their ability to contribute meaningfully to Global Asian Studies.

The authors discuss new methodologies, emphasizing the importance of digital humanities and especially the spread of open-access data as a boon for researchers on Asia. They use the metaphor of Asia changing from a “desert to an oasis of raw data.” I think the metaphor is apt, but perhaps in an unintended way it cues us to one of the problems with data sets, which is that they can mimic economic inequalities whereby the data rich get richer and the data poor get poorer, relatively speaking. Open access to data sets is a powerful way to escape research silos, as the authors point out, but for me the more interesting data question is who and what gets left out? We shouldn’t be satisfied to work in a digitized version of a world of data Haves/Have-Nots. The overwhelming quantity of open-access data should also temper our enthusiasm about its value. When does a technology reach a saturation point that defies human ability to make meaningful sense of it? I think we are already there.

A related methodological issue the authors address is the new opportunity created by internet access to blogs and archives for scholars to work off-site in addition to their traditional on-site methods of data collection. The authors argue that the “COVID-19 pandemic has brought the potential of online approaches to research into focus,” but privacy issues, cyber security, misinformation campaigns by state actors, and so on come to mind as reasons for caution. Censorship can lead to blind spots in internet-dependent methodologies as well – if, for example, blogs are suppressed or archives withheld from digitization for political reasons. I am concerned about the dangers and pitfalls that come along with this methodological opportunity.

The authors argue that Global Asian Studies will be spearheaded increasingly by multilingual scholars, which I believe has been the case in the more philologically-oriented European universities for a long time. Their description ignores one important variety of multilingualism in the context of conventional Asian Studies: the training that scholars receive in classical, medieval, early-modern, modern, and even dialect forms of a language, each of which can be very different. The picture is further complicated in the case of my field of Japanese literature where, for example, there is a tradition of reading Classical Chinese text as Japanese and composing Japanese text in Classical Chinese, all of which must be learned and mastered apart from the modern language. A related question is whether Global Asian Studies will exclude researchers in classical, medieval, and early modern Asian fields and leave them to pursue conventional Asian Studies, or if they are able to carve out a role as multilingual (by this expanded definition) specialists in Global Asian Studies along with researchers of the modern. There is a lot of historical interconnectivity, after all, that underpins our current world that can only be researched by those with knowledge of older written forms of Asian languages.

The authors suggest that, “because of the language requirements and the time commitment required to develop expertise even in one country,” the best way for area specialists to attain regional coverage and produce effective comparative research is “through partnership with domestic authors

thanks to increasing connectivity among Asia.” This model seems dangerously close to a “native informant” methodology that conventional Asian Studies has tried to move away from. Co-authorship is routine in some fields, not in others, so many scholars may find themselves in a context in which this approach is not applicable. In that case, I wonder if such scholars will also be unable to pursue the proposed agenda for Global Asian Studies and find themselves confined to working within conventional Asian Studies. It seems that the authors do not see Global Asian Studies as supplanting conventional Asian Studies, but rather they see the two approaches working together in a complementary relationship. The draft concludes with a statement of goals for the IJAS at the University of Tokyo, as follows: “On top of publishing high quality studies in *conventional Asian Studies*, IJAS aspires particularly to emphasize cutting-edge work in the *emerging field of Global Asian Studies*” (emphasis added).

Finally, the authors address “Global Asia” as an emerging concept on the basis of its increased importance as a buzz word in East Asian funding agencies, universities, and research centers since 2005. I want to question if this signifies an emerging concept or an over-ripe concept that is perhaps on its way out. The reason I ask this has to do with the fact that – compared to economic institutions where trends are fast-paced – funding agencies, universities, and research centers are intellectual institutions that tend to resist change and are often the last to get on board with trends, not the first. There are already many indications that the globalizing world we have gotten used to has changed radically. In 2019, *The Economist* coined the word “slowbalization” to describe the ways efficiencies produced by faster shipping and just-in-time distribution of parts for manufacturing have maxed out. The toll on the environment of the fossil footprint supporting globalized trade networks is widely recognized as unsustainable, and many businesses are shifting toward a recognition of this even more quickly than national governments. The free and open internet, which supported so much of what we associate with global interconnectivity, is entering an era of increased restriction by state actors including China, Australia, and the U.S.A., leading to the neologism “splinternet.” My question here is whether we are still in a moment when linking the global to interconnectivity is a viable frame for future work in Asian Studies, or if we are instead on the cusp of a post-global reckoning. If we could incorporate more of the troubling shadows in the region into a research agenda for Global Asian Studies, I think we could end up with a more realistic framework for developing the field. I am not advocating a dystopic vision for Asian Studies, just asking us to consider if Global Asian Studies is already on the verge of becoming a thing of the past, and in fact if we should be directing our thinking toward a less optimistic post-Global Asian Studies and what it might look like.

The pluralities of Global Asia (Anjali Nerlekar)

At the time of writing, it is impossible to escape reports on the globality of our moment and the multiplicity of Asia. The 220,000-ton container ship, *Ever Given*, owned by a Japanese company and operated by the Taiwanese Evergreen Marine, got stuck in the Suez Canal operated by Egypt. The huge ship blocked all shipping traffic in the canal, prompting an international concern to dislodge the ship and restore partial traffic to the shipping passage. The globality of Asian connections, as well as the obstacles in its way, finds a metaphor in this current problem that exercised the whole world’s imagination. It is only when the fragile waterways and the supply chains are disrupted in this manner that the Middle East, because of its geographic position in commercial routes today, gets implicated in the conception of Global Asias, although it has been for more than 2,000 years since the days of the Silk Road.

Asia’s globality is a central concern with regard to the locations and institutions in which the region is framed as the Middle East. By its very name, the Middle East gets categorically separated from the Asias whereas these regions should be read, studied, and seen together. This division is not only true from the perception of locations in the Global North. It is also an issue within the Asias as the visibility of Asia gets reduced to a handful of locations and regions.

Sato and Sonoda’s article reiterates the need to develop a methodology that goes beyond Euro- and America-centricism and instead takes the locations of the Asias as the reference point for charting the

world. It also emphasizes the continued relevance of Area Studies to the study of Global Asias, as opposed to the Inter-Asia paradigm discussed in 2019 by a group of scholars – Chua Beng Huat, Ken Dean, Ho Engseeng, Ho Kong Chong, Jonathan Rigg, and Brenda Yeoh – who advocate moving away from the worldview of Area Studies. Sato and Sonoda’s proposal speaks to some of the concerns of this essay on Inter-Asian Studies but it also needs to address the problems of “the de-bordering (or re-bordering) character of globalization” (Chua Beng Huat *et al.* 2019, p. 37). Does the idea of Global Asias create its own internal borders and exclusions?

The issue at stake here is the plurality of what “Asia” is. Gayatri Spivak deliberately lists the names she found online (“I write to cite and pluralize the name of a continent”) to illustrate the range that lies hidden under the common continental name:

Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Cyprus, Georgia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, the Koreas, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Lebanon, Macau, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Oman, Pakistan, Parcel Islands, Philippines, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Spratly Islands, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Vietnam. Asia.²

In that context, one interesting aspect to notice is the world of the “the Middle East” that gets recast differently here. In many spaces in the Global South, and also at the Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, this is classified as “West Asia” and brings with it a different geographical positionality into view. The connections and the differences between these two terms – the Middle East and West Asia – help uncover the histories of this space: one, a notion that is grounded in the Cold War perspective of the world and which centers the perspective firmly in the intellectual history of the Global North (East of what?); versus the other, which is a more geographically cohesive and inclusive term that establishes different kinds of internal connections between these spaces and the rest of Asia. Calling the region “West Asia” brings into view the multiple historical and cultural connections, and even disruptions, between this region of Asia and the rest, through trade routes, religious pathways and current political alignments. But, West Asian studies do not always find a foothold within the pathways of Global Asias very easily. Perhaps there needs to be a conscious emplacement of the heterogeneity of the Asias within the paradigm of Global Asia in order to make it properly inclusive.

Topologies of the inside out (Allan Punzalan Isaac)

At the passing of an aunt, her only child working and living in Dubai, texted the Messenger thread connecting her with cousins in Manila, Los Angeles, New York, and Sydney to make hospital then funeral arrangements thousands of miles away before she could fly back home as work permitted. Prayers, words of support, and resources were offered from the two dozen or so cousins and their families from these other cities. The event was devastating, but the social media platform formed a necessary communal site for those grieving. Years before the pandemic made such remote practices necessary for many, Filipino and other migratory diasporas across many countries have inhabited by necessity a transnational world connected by telematic circuitry. These vital spaces, as part of the quotidian for some, occasional and intermittent for others, locate where life events are lived, shared, and spent. I begin with this somewhat personal habitus to highlight life-worlds in the Filipino labor diaspora that are not quite space-based, yet quite localized and specific *and* irrefutably conditioned by global capital and labor relations dictated by grossly unequal North-South relations.

The research agenda Sato and Sonoda suggest seeks to render visible multiple levels of connectivity and life-worlds alongside nation-state formations and histories. Putting forward “inside out” as an approach, Sato and Sonoda signal with this topological trope the limitations of the study of Asia

²Spivak 2008, pp. 236–37.

from the outside, predominantly from Europe or North America, embedded as those relations are within enduring imperial histories and structures of knowledge. Pressing upon this trope, as in geometry, topology concerns itself with continuities and deformations of shapes and surfaces. Imagine the fascinating and imaginary Möbius strip, a surface and shape that refuses inside and outside. The proposed agenda suggests a directional shift away from the outside-in, thus unmooring some conventional knowledge trajectories. In my rhetorical reading of this trope, the topology of inside out does not simply reverse the power/knowledge nexus of native speaker over hegemon. Rather, the topological shift poses the undoing altogether of inside and outside, local and global, and past and current relational and capitalist modes, with all the presumptions scholars might have of these binaries. The world created by the local–global virtual vignette above does not lend itself to readily identifiable insides and outsides. Diasporic kin makes use of technological affordances not only to facilitate the flow of capital for each other, but also to partake in important communal rituals that do not readily serve the capital or national productivity with which the “global” is usually aligned. Technological tools are wielded for other purposes beyond data exchange, and communal meanings are created in this act of repurposing.

Trans-local life-worlds such as these, therefore, thrive within and nuance our understanding of the “global” alongside nation-state economic hegemonies. As has been the concern of Asian American and Asian diaspora studies, inequalities are lived within and across intersecting and multiple insides and outsides, wherein elements understood to be local or global formations are not easily distinguished from one another. Although migrant dispersals result from labor and economic demands from capital rich-nations, the affective life that supports the diasporic subject comes from other localized spaces of kinship “out there,” enabled by a variety of platforms and histories and made less remote by “going remote.” The “outside” too cannot be reduced to global forces exerted upon the local actor. Each local social formation on that cousin thread is thick and riven with multiple forces shaping it: internal racializations; competing nation-building projects; diasporic politics and nationalisms; (extra)legal and economic proscriptions; regional consumption patterns; and imperial and colonial histories. The local is not a singular locus at all but the very relations and tensions which make it up including global histories, past and present: U.S.A., Spanish, and Japanese colonizations of the Philippines, the White Australia policy, the targeted recruitment of Filipinos and other nationalities for niche occupations in the Gulf states, and so on.

Upon closer examination, the texture of the local surfaces also reveals intentional and circumstantial queer formations of families and affective networks not necessarily aligned with state-sanctioned national projects. Each local formation of the “family” kinship unit on the cousin thread has varied relationships to the destination nation-state, temporary worker status, gray economic arrangements, not to mention family formations from blended families as well as informal family and affective arrangements. The spatial distance affords privacy and semi-autonomy from the transnational kinship network and duties without sacrificing the chosen lives and families of each. This arrangement “together, apart” did not just emerge because of the current pandemic but is the very condition of contemporary labor migration and the legal obstacles to crossing borders, easier and more legal for some than for others. More importantly, global capital as such cannot fully capture the communal realignments and meaning-making capacities emerging from transnational kinship, regional communality, and alternative affective worlds that may not even occupy physical space. These trans-local-global formations forged from socio-economic inequalities bring forth life-worlds that do not necessarily align with linear capitalist and national developments. Indeed, as the uncaptured excess abjected from developmental narratives – filled with violence, exclusions, hierarchizations, and deaths – these trans-local topological deformations continually shift and disrupt the (non)terrain and temporalities of these global fantasies.

The place of premodernity (Tamara Sears)

The project of rethinking the study of Asia is a massive undertaking that is long overdue, and Sato and Sonoda’s paper provides a productive vision for untethering regional studies from the Cold War era

approaches and methodologies that have lingered for far too long. I find many of the directions that they suggest exciting, particularly the call for increasing international collaboration in research and the emphasis on multilingual research. At the same time, as an art and architectural historian whose research is primarily focused on ancient and medieval South Asia, I frequently find myself wondering about the place of premodernity in the study of Global Asia today. To this end, this response briefly reflects on the place of premodernity in the study of Global Asia.

As a historian, I welcome Sato and Sonoda's emphasis on securing a deep regional expertise in the language and culture of a particular place or "country," as a foundation for discovering the global. For those who work on premodern eras, this means also recognizing the inherent alterity of the past and becoming immersed not merely in a region as it exists today but in the intellectual, cultural, and visual habits of mind that would have governed the formation of communities and modes of connectivity. Language training is essential, not only for accessing sources but also for understanding other forms of embedded cultural knowledge. Pointing to the use of classical Chinese by Japanese authors in his response, Paul Schalow suggests expanding the emphasis on multilingualism also to the study of earlier materials and argues that the historical interconnectivity underpinning our current world "can only be researched by those with knowledge of older written forms of Asian languages." His point is illustrated beautifully by Sen's (2017) publication of *India, China, and the World: A Connected History*, which drew upon his scholarly rootedness in medieval trade networks and the interconnectedness of the premodern Buddhist world to disentangle the very narratives that were being deployed in the Doklam border standoff between India and China that very year.

I suggest the same is true for studies in visual and material culture, which not only weave very different narratives from those conveyed primarily through the circulation of literary texts but also demands us to think transregionally even in the context of a single node or locality. Such was the case at Bodh Gaya, the pilgrimage site associated with the enlightenment of the Buddha, where a series of Tibetan, Burmese, and Chinese inscriptions attest to long-distance connections in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. Although these document the presence of monks and merchant devotees, a Song dynasty record meant to adorn a shrine commissioned by the emperor Renzong (r. 1022–63) in memory of the deceased Taizong (r. 976–997) suggests an act of imperial self-fashioning on a global scale (Gongkasang and Willis 2013). Similarly, the scholarly reconstruction of a Chinese Buddhist temple at the Southeast Indian coast town of Nagapattinam and a Hindu temple built by South Indian merchant community in the port of Quanzhou in Fujian Province attest to a vibrant interconnectivity that was fueled primarily by trade rather than religious pilgrimage (Guy 1993/94; Lee 2009). The vastly diminished significance of both of these port towns today attests to the degree to which modern modes of transportation have reconfigured our perception of the cultural and geographic spaces, producing new cultural imaginaries centered on largely modern cities, forged through the expansion of trade with Europe in the early modern era and the expansion of global capitalism under colonialism. In many areas of Asia, the lack of consistent infrastructure makes travel extremely challenging, thereby limiting efforts to research, and sometimes even conceptualize, the extent and shape of transregional interactions at various moments in the past.

For art historians studying Asia, such immersion provides the foundation for contextualizing objects that have been dispersed in museum collections largely outside of Asia and for contending with the politics of cultural heritage that continually seeks to rewrite the history of the built environment in ways that reinscribe nationalist aspirations. It also gives us a means for imagining new topologies that undermine the regional fantasies that were produced by the political and ideological structures of imperialism, nationalism, and global capitalism. In thinking through the formation of community identities over a *longue durée*, Duara (2010) argued that whereas pre-nationalist societies were characterized by "soft boundaries," in which "individual community difference...would not prevent large-scale and un-self-coconscious borrowing...[m]odern nationalisms sought precisely to create hard boundaries between communities" in ways that cultivated "intolerance for the non-national Other" (2010, p. 982). In many ways, the democratization of flows of knowledge in today's era of globalization is loosening the "hard boundaries" build over the last two centuries. As nations fight to

reinscribe communal identities through cultural policies and architectural projects, such as seen recently in the dismantlement of the Vishwanath Corridor in Varanasi, India (Dodson 2019), the methods and practices of mapping premodernity can provide powerful articulations for a less divisive and socially just future.

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