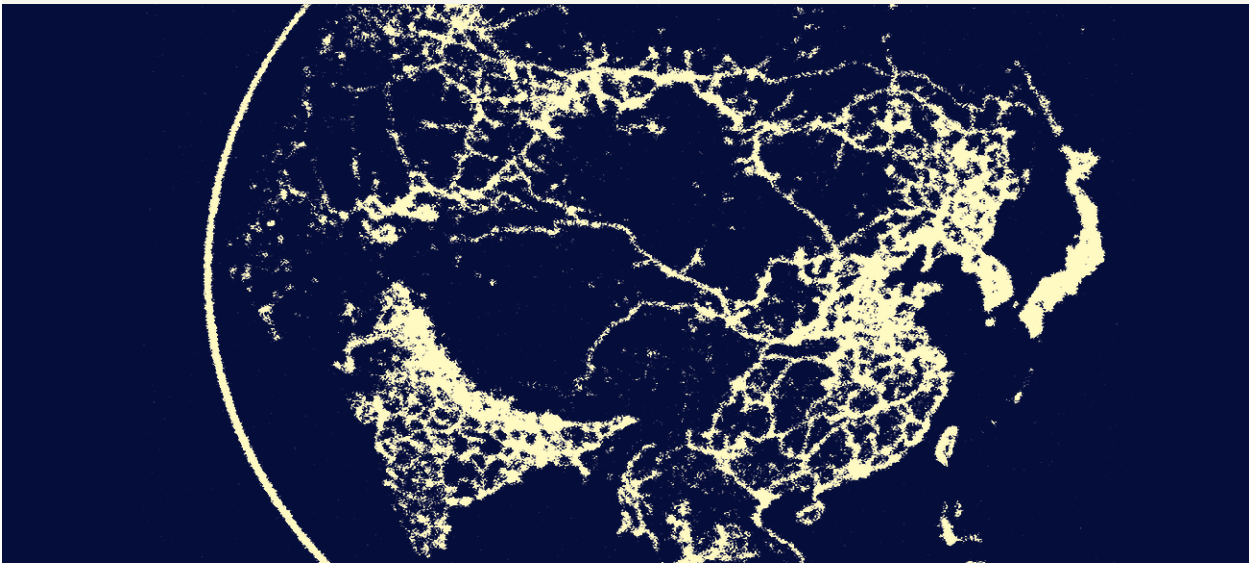


New scholarship from Asia

Theories in the social sciences are almost without exception developed in the West and based largely on the historical experiences of Western societies. For a long time, Asia and the non-West have been at best laboratories to validate universalized Western-based theories. In recent years, however, there has been increasing criticism against the hegemony of Euro-American scholarship. Advocates of alternative scholarship have urged for the provincialization of Western perspectives, the invigoration of autonomous social sciences outside the Western tradition, and the development of ‘reverse discourses’ in order for non-Western scholarship to theorize back at the West.

Tak-Wing Ngo



New centres of knowledge

Under the existing structure of global academic dependency and intellectual division of labour, in which the production of knowledge as well as the authority to define what constitutes knowledge is firmly controlled by the West, it is not surprising that the progress towards autochthonous scholarship from the non-West has been slow. But this is changing with the shifting gravity of scholarship in Asian Studies. The rise of Asia, or more importantly the opening up of Asia, provides the most conducive setting for the emergence of new scholarship.

The opportunity for reinvigorated scholarship can be attributed to the increasing openness, accessibility, diversity, and connectivity of Asia, leading to the emergence of new research questions and agendas, new methodologies, and new perspectives and theories. The democratization of South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and the opening up of China, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, and others have allowed researchers, both local and Western, to conduct fieldwork studies not only in the capital cities, but also in peripheral regions of Asian countries. The study of Asia is thus no longer confined to the study of the flatlands. As more and more researchers with local language skills decipher the specificities of their research sites, it becomes apparent that the plurality of regional dialects, indigenous norms and practices, and local forms of exchange and governance, as well as the varieties of connectivity among border communities with fuzzy boundaries that supersede nationalized borders, have posed serious problems for reductionist grand theories. New conceptual categories and grounded theories need to be developed through inductive approaches. New research questions and agendas have to be formulated to address issues that have hitherto been overlooked by the Western gaze.

These new conceptual categories, perspectives, and research questions may gain popularity as more and more scholars direct their focus on Asia. If we count those researchers working in Euro-American universities, ‘Asianists’ remain a minority in academia. This will change dramatically when academic institutions and researchers in Asia assert their presence and channel their efforts in Asian Studies. As mobility, collaboration, and networking among scholars around the world and within Asia increase, the hitherto unquestionable role of Euro-American academies as the singular knowledge clearinghouse will be undermined in the long run. The West will no doubt continue to be a major centre of knowledge production, but it will loosen its monopolistic grip when other centres and networks emerge.

The problem of language and rankings

There are of course major institutional constraints and

challenges facing the rise of autochthonous Asian scholarship. One outstanding problem is that of language. From the outset, observers have indicated that the mediation of scholarly exchange will continue to be conducted through the English language, which is far from a neutral tool for the transaction of knowledge. Unspoken assumptions and values associated with the language will inevitably be imported into the exchange. Closely related to this impasse is the obsession of many Asian institutions with university rankings. One direct result is the overwhelming emphasis on the quantity of publications rather than the quality of research. The preoccupation with quantity is often translated into a numerical count of articles published in SSCI journals, because of which an indexing service run by a commercial enterprise, originally meant to facilitate literature searches, is now used as a yardstick for ranking journals. This intellectual fetishism has in turn displaced the ostensible goal of academic journals from one of communicating research findings, to that of an instrument for securing tenure, promotion, or higher ranking. Worse still, since journals indexed in SSCI are published exclusively in the English language, scholarly works written in indigenous languages are completely side-lined in the current academic publication regime. Some places do have their own local journal ranking system (for instance, CSSCI in China and TSSCI in Taiwan), but local journals are still considered inferior to journals ranked by SSCI. Young scholars who aspire to climb the academic ladder are therefore obliged to play the game.

Quality over quantity

These constraints are not easy to overcome. The best way out is probably the wisdom of the Golden Mean. Instead of seeing it as an either-or choice, the academic community should recognize the equal value of both English-language and non-English-language publications. The value of a piece of scholarship should be judged in terms of its content rather than by the language in which it is written. In this regard, the ICAS Book Prize is setting a good example by including Chinese and Japanese scholarly books in its future editions. Some journals have also begun to include book reviews of non-English language works. In the meantime, the popularization of the Internet has greatly facilitated the accessibility of non-English publications. These are positive developments. Hopefully, university administrators will come to realize the value of local publications, and will encourage internationalization without compromising indigenous scholarship.

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EARLIER IN THE YEAR we sent out a survey concerning our topic, the “New Asia Scholar”. A large number of our readers responded, for which we are extremely grateful. We selected a number of quotes given in the survey, and have displayed them randomly on the following pages. Some quotes have been altered for the benefit of space, others have been left untouched.

“THE IDEA of “cultural flows” that Appadurai brought together so persuasively a generation ago applies not only to the places and people we study, but to ourselves as knowledge workers, too. The image of New Asia Scholar has long carried elements of multi-site fieldwork, interdisciplinarity, and life histories of authors crossing borders and boundaries. But perhaps what is newly emerging in 2015 is a sharper picture of what that means: what it looks like to be an Asia Scholar in these times of turmoil, economic and environmental pressures and the simple friction of increasingly rubbing against people different to ourselves. At this moment, then, the need for specialists and those experienced in connecting ideas, places and people thoughtfully and articulately could never be felt more strongly than now.

Of course there have always been cultural brokers, communicators, gatekeepers of knowledge and pioneers of research. But before now the scale of interchange has been relatively small and the consequences for bad decisions or inaccurate understanding has not been on too big of a scale. Now, however, the pace of change in many parts of the world is faster and the extent of being digitally connected is much wider than before. So any message, view or decision can reach people more widely and more quickly than before. Where the knowledge or wisdom is good, that is well. But where the understanding is partial or even wrong-headed, that can be terrible. Enter the individual scholar and the institutions for Asian Studies.

For more than 100 years many universities and colleges have declared their mission to be teaching the current knowledge, creating new knowledge, and applying knowledge in service of problem-solving for the wider population through outreach education. Outreach, however, has not been the top priority. So a lot of valuable information, thinking, methods and findings circulates only among a handful of readers and their colleagues. The New Asia Scholar needs to be the first to promote his or her work more widely: making it easy to find, easy to acquire, and easy to apply or adapt by non-specialists who nevertheless are stakeholders in the subject matter. In other words, now is the time for each Scholar, scholar-to-be, and scholar newly retired to reach out with their work by online slideshow, eBook, video clips, images, blog articles or commenting on other’s work, and so on. The newest Asia Scholar is now all-in-one: creator of new knowledge, teacher of current knowledge, and source of outreach in subjects of expertise.

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MUCH OF THE SCHOLARLY RESEARCH and communications in Asian Studies, particularly as they relate to Northeast Asian countries, take place within national frameworks, i.e., among students of a particular country and not across broader regions. Even regionally framed research and communications tend to be dominated by national perspectives, with very little infusion of multi-nation or regional perspectives. These tendencies unnecessarily limit possibilities of international collaboration and cross-national comparisons. “Area studies” should go beyond national foci and national frameworks. Disciplinary divisions also are limiting the opportunity to expand the horizons of our scholarship. Another serious problem is the lack of introduction of research published in Asian languages to the English-speaking audience and vice versa, thus perpetuating the gap between English and Asian-language scholarship. There are some encouraging signs, however, as colleagues are beginning to look at “global” issues with regional lenses and those outside of Asia are bringing their perspectives and insights into the region through scholarship and academic conference participation.

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AS SOMEONE INTERESTED in research at the interface of the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities (regarding humans and elephants in South and Southeast Asia), and who regularly engages with animal biologists and ecologists, I am struck by the degree to which Asian Studies tends to exclude the natural sciences. For me, the Asian Studies of the future needs to transcend its background in the humanities and embrace more challenging forms of interdisciplinarity across methodological and epistemological divides. After all, the natural environment and the forms of scientific expertise for understanding it are becoming increasingly relevant for all of us in an age of ecological crisis.

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