Asia in Europe, Europe in Asia

It has been more than fifty years since the processes of decolonization changed the landscape in Asia and its relations with its former European colonizers. Global movements of capital, knowledge, and people have shown us that social spaces and cultures cannot along-side to each other as areas marked off with boundaries, but have to be viewed as articulated within a network of relations and understandings. At the beginning of the new millennium, it is important to reassess the academic, social, and cultural relations, which bring Europe and Asia together, both from a contemporary and historical perspective.

For a long time, the colonial relations between Europe and Asia have been the main focus of academic interest. More recently, debates have centered on contemporary aspects of the Europe-Asia partnership and international relations and economic linkages. To complement this political and economic interest in the Europe-Asia relationship a workshop on “Asia in Europe, Europe in Asia” was held in Singapore on 7 and 8 December 2001. It focused on the academic, social, and cultural linkages between the two regions and its associated scholarship in the field of history and social sciences.

The various aspects of the academic relationship between Asia and Europe formed a central theme of discussion. Following Satish Sahuwar’s (Gawaher- lal Nehru University, Dehli) overview of what Asians have done with things European in terms of technology, institutional forms, modes of knowing, and the level of values, the discussion focused on Southeast Asia as a field of study and its implicit Eurocentrism. Henk Schulte Nordholt (University of Leiden, NL) emphasized that in many respects Southeast Asia is a region by default, while Southeast Asian Studies has been framed by a post-colonial predicament. He argued that foreign institutions and scholars have to a large extent determined the research agenda of Southeast Asian Studies, a situation that would have been unthinkable in the South Asian context. In line with this argument, Syed Farid Alatas (National University of Singapore, NUS) explored the possibilities of a reversal of this academic dependency. He believes one practice that could work well for the emergence of alternative discourses is to lessen reliance on European or American standards that may not be appropriate and, at the same time, work towards the upgrading of local publication capabilities. He emphasized, however, that such a development of local publications can only work if scholars and promotion or tenure committees give as much credit to locally published works as to international publications. A related point stands that the Asia-Europe relationship that came up for discussion was the actual interaction between the two regions in the domains of science. In this connection, historical case studies were presented on archaeology in Thailand, health in India, and socio-cultural aspects of the visual arts in Japan. In the case of semology, Gregory Clancy (NUS) showed how the act of framing an “earthquake problem” in Meiji Japan was conducted by Westerners, who had in fact been hired to teach and research other science topics in Japanese academic institutions. At a time when the Japanese market for design is model of planned science and technology transfer from the West to Japan, a branch of “Western learning” could develop spontaneously in Japan and eventually be exported abroad as a Japanese specialty. In this way, the peculiar trajectory of semology is an interesting addition to the debate on Asia-Europe interaction in the field of science and technology.

A second important theme in the Asia-Europe relationship is the contemporary social and cultural relations between the two regions. One of the ways in which these relations can be studied is through research on migrants of Asian origin in Europe. Case studies on the social linkages between Gujarati migrants In London and their relatives in India, and on the social position of Vietnamese immigrants in France, for example, showed how differences within the migrant community in Asia influence social relations in Europe, and vice versa. Such a complex pattern of socio-cultural interaction between Asia and Europe was also shown in research that dealt with cultural productions in the Vietnamese context: the representations of the Vietnam War in Western media and the construction and reassessment of mixed-race (Franco-Vietnamese) consciousness in European literature.

In terms of the influence of popular culture between Asia and Europe, Chua Beng Huat (NUS) emphasized the absence of Europe in the Asian popular sphere today. He pointed out the dominating Asian influence in Southeast Asia in the field of film, music, and food, which has resulted in an almost total erasure of European elements in popular cultural productions in the region. At the same time, Hindi films from India, Chinese pop music, and television series from Japan have become increasingly popular among large sections of the population of Southeast Asia. Interestingly, the popularity of these cultural consumer products from Asia is not so much related to their cultural proximity. One of the most important developments in the context of globalization today is the fact that one loses sight of the origins in the context of globalized consumer culture. Asia-Europe partnership in terms of supply and demand is no longer in doubt, but it is truly become a cultural phenomenon, free from its national or regional roots.

The organizers propose to bring out an edited volume of a selection of the papers presented. The workshop was a follow-up of an earlier meeting in Amster- dam between scholars from the NUS and the IAS and University of Amster- dam in December 2000. It is hoped that the collaboration between the two institutions will be continued in the years to come. Plans are being made to organize another such workshop in Amsterdam in December 2002.

By Srilata Ravi

New Global Networking in the Automotive Industry

Since Ford devised the mass-production system in the early 20th century, the automobile industry has been the spearhead of many of the organizational and production models that have led to a transformation of competitive practices. Globalization of the Japanese automobile industry in the early 1980s and spread more rapidly after the Plaza Agreement of 1985 and 1987, which was a result of the yen. Japanese cars, more than before, are increasingly produced outside of Japan, and Japanese brands dominate Southeast Asian markets. It is widely believed that, during the 1980s and the 1990s, Japanese automobile manufacturers had a comparative advantage to their competitors because of their systems of production and labour organization.

By Yuri Sadoi

The aim of the international conference, “New Global Networking in the Automotive Industry-The Effect of Technology Transfer in the Case of Japanese Transplants in Southeast Asia and Europe”, held at the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, was to explore the relationship between Japanese global production networks in the automobile industry and its consequences for technology transfer. The Japanese overseas production networks in the automobile industry were explored, as well as their consequences for host countries’ policy making, industrial organization, skill formation, and technology transfer in Southeast Asia and in Europe. The two-day conference addressed two themes on the first day, the focus was on Japanese industrial organization and technology transfer, while the programme on the second day was concerned with the changing relationship between work organization, skill formation, and technology transfer.

An opening statement by Dr C. Touwen-Bouwsma, Chair of IAS Academic Committee, was followed by the keynote speech “Industrial Organization, Culture, and Technology Transfer” by Dr. J.A. Sturm, Eramus Universi- ty Rotterdam, on the first day. This day was devoted to host countries’ policy issues on economic and technology development in order to put Japanese industrial organization at overseas locations into perspective. The direct and indirect implications of the Japanese automobile overseas production policy on technology transfer were examined. Current issues with regard to the effects of the Asian financial crisis, the recovery process, and how the prospective of Asian Free Trade Agreements will affect the automobile industry in the region were also discussed. The keynote speech on the second day, entitled “Intellectu- al Skill and its Transferability”, was delivered by Professor Kazuo Koke, Tokai Gakuen University, Japan. His speech was followed by discussions aimed at examining the transferabil- ity of the Japanese human resource development system to the automobile industry in Southeast Asia, and comparing these systems to those in the European automobile industry, in which Japanese presence is very limited. The role of the Japanese automotive producers in introducing the Japanese production system and training patterns and skill upgrading were also discussed in detail. Pre- sentations of intensive field studies on skill formation in Japan and the increasingly important role of human capital in raising important issues concerning work organization, labour training, and incentives for enterprises and individuals.

In total, sixty scholars and researchers-most of whom were social scientists with a particular interest in the automotive industry as well as company representatives attended the conference (including the speakers), with between forty to fifty people present each day. Speakers were invited from Japan (four), Southeast Asia (five: Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia), and from Europe (six). Thirteen papers in total were presented. Through bringing together scholars from these academic and international backgrounds, the discussions during the conference shed light on the study of the globalization of the Japanese automobile industry and its consequences regarding technology transfer for the host countries of Japanese foreign-invested enterprises. In the automotive industry, it is clear that the quality of the papers was outstanding and much commented upon both during and after presentations. All the participants received the proceedings of the papers in advance, in-depth discussions and comments were active and greatly raised throughout the conference. A selected number of papers presented at the workshop will be published as a research monograph.

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