

## **ASIAN STUDIES: ISSUES AND RESEARCH AGENDA**

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The topic of this volume, "Asian Studies in the Age of Globalization," directly points to two issues which I wish to discuss. Our title reflects these: first, Asian studies as an aspect of the academic study of foreign areas or area studies; and, second, the increasingly rapid globalization of economics, politics and even cultural patterns and developments in this century. The first of these aspects, area studies, is obviously of concern to the Center for Area Studies at Seoul National University; it is also of concern to all of us professionally as area studies specialists. The second is of concern to all humanity. When Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s coined the phrase the "global village" (McLuhan 1989), meaning a wired earth where no community was outside of the information networks of any other, he was clearly pointing to a phenomenon which has come to pass more rapidly than most of us conceived to be possible at that time.

However, when many people, especially specialists in strategic studies and international relations, talk of the globalization of human activities and enterprises in the 1990s, they are referring to a more limited, if no less important, phenomenon: the end of the Cold War. For those of us in Europe, the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the replacement of Communist-ruled states by a plethora of old and new governments pointed to the emergence of a new structure of world politics. Some of these new states have been successful and many unsuccessful in coping with pent-up demands for individual rights and ethnically-designated privileges. Though the collapse of the divide between the so-called capitalist and communist worlds has been profound, it would be naive in the extreme not to acknowledge that Cold War legacies and the problems left in their wake persist on the Korean peninsula in a form similar to the previous division of European.

But the end of the Cold War and the resulting new political and economic issues which have arisen as a consequence are merely a symptom, not a cause, of the globalization of the human enterprise in the twentieth century. And it is here that area studies as an academic enterprise comes into its own and justifies our time and many people's money.

Looked at in the perspective of an historian from Mars trying to periodize Earthlings' history for the past several thousand years, what would seem to be one of, if not the most, significant transformation which has taken place during the past 100 or so years? I would argue that it is the rapid and complete transformation of the globe into a series of theoretically discrete but actually tightly bound and linked states and societies, none of which exists in isolation from the consequences of the actions of people residing in the others, though they be on the other side of the globe. Contrast this to the condition of humanity two hundred years ago. Isolated communities, with limited relationships with their own rulers—kings, emperors, sultans, chiefs of one kind or another—living distinctive and essentially isolated lives most of the time. The value they placed on their commodities and the consequences of their activities were of little concern to anyone other than themselves.

All of that broke down as a consequence of what used to be called benevolently the expansion of Europe, or more normally and explicitly imperialism and colonialism. This, of course, was not just a European phenomenon, for it was a product in significant degree of the relative industrial and commercial power of states, as the rise of Japanese might in East Asia demonstrated.

Imperialism not only led to the spread of capitalist modes of production and exchange throughout the world, but also the political forms and institutions which arose with that: nationalism, individualism, republicanism, and the nation—state ideal. In this lies the paradox of the history of the globalization of human activities of the past hundred years or so, for the rise of these now nearly universal values and ideas, and the political institutions that go with them—elections, standing armies, universal conscription, patriotism, etc.—is the consequence of the process of breaking down the historical isolation and distinctiveness of the human societies that predated their reification now in new forms—hence the invented traditions in like form of the modern—nation state, whether found in Europe, America, Africa, or Asia.<sup>1</sup>

It is from this paradox that the field of area studies has arisen and earned a motto for its practitioners: "think globally but look locally." What does this mean? I think it means that the central issue that underlies the research agenda of area studies scholars of Asia or anywhere else in the future is that of understanding how particular societies and

<sup>1</sup> Recent patterns of human migration and the electronic wiring of the globe has added a further political complication to this picture (See Anderson 1992).

people have been adapting to the consequences of global change in the contemporary world in contrast to the ways their own and other countries have done so.

The example of the Asian country I know a little bit about will make these abstract notions more concrete. Consider the case of the history of Burma, or Myanmar as it is now known in foreign languages as well as Burmese, during the past hundred and fifty years. At the time of the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824, the population of Burma numbered no more than two or three millions, less now than that of the capital, Yangon. These people were governed by a variety of personal rulers with only remote and often highly irregular relations with their subjects. There was little of what we would recognize today as a central authority or over-arching government capable of intervening in a regular and effective manner into the lives of the people. Though trade was an important source of revenue for the rulers, and taxation in labor and kind existed, different areas within this society were distinctive and relatively remote from one another. Even a common religion was capable of highly variable interpretations, and linguistic and their cultural variety was great but little commented upon, being part of the then natural order of life.

Contrast that society to the one which existed a little over a hundred years later, in the 1930s. People were now governed impersonally, through a remote bureaucracy ultimately responsible to London via the authorities of the British Indian empire. That bureaucracy was capable of imposing all sorts of rules and regulations on the people, perhaps with good intent, but often with unwanted effect. Taxation was direct and largely arbitrary and collected not in kind and labor, but in monetary form. Newspapers and other printed matter were reasonably widespread and brought news and views from Europe, India, and much of the rest of the world on a daily basis. The value of labor and of commodities was determined by the abstract instrument of money, the value of which in turn was determined by the price of rice and other commodities produced in Burma but bought and sold in London for the consumption of people in Europe, India and the rest of the world. When the great depression of the 1930s destroyed the value of goods and services in London and the rest of the industrialized world, the consequence was felt by Burmese peasant farmers. When Indian moneylenders foreclosed on loans made available to Burmese cultivators, they did so because the Indian banks they had borrowed their capital from were facing demands from Europe for repayment (Furnivall 1948; Scott 1976). Global credit is not a post-World War II phenomenon.

And what was the consequence of the great depression in the money markets of the world? One was peasant revolt in Burma. This in turn helped inspire and mobilized thousands of persons into a nationalist movement which demanded the individualism, republicanism, and independent nation-state which capitalism had helped create as the model of the modern world and which imperialism had so effectively spread.

Independence came in 1948 in the name of nationalism and also socialism, another import from Europe but understood in particular Burmese terms reflecting ideas meaningful in the Burmese context. The newly-established Burmese state attempted to undo many of the consequences of capitalism on Burmese society in the name of socialism and autarkic independence. After 1962 especially, the Burmese military government attempted to set its policy in opposition to global trends and pressures in the hope of protecting the society from these insistent external forces. We know now the consequences of that, for while much of Asia developed economically during decades since then, the economy of Myanmar remained relatively unchanged. The result was the ending of one party socialist rule in 1988 after widespread public demonstrations and protests—a year before the communist regimes of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union met a similar fate. The paradox is, of course, that even the states that have attempted to thwart the trends of the past one hundred and more years have had to give way, and Burma, like most of the rest of the world, has officially endorsed market economics, democratic politics, and involvement in world trade and development. The challenge for the area studies scholar of Burma is to understand these trends and issues in their particularities but also in their global context (Taylor 1987; Taylor 1991).

My understanding of the consequences of the globalization of markets, technology, and ideas, and their apparently irresistible power over these regimes that have attempted to ignore, rather than adapt to them as the economically successful states of Asia have done in the post-colonial world (Deyo 1987; Hughes 1988), is the result of both my own research on Burmese politics during the past one hundred years as well as the research of many other scholars working on other aspects of political, cultural, and economic change in Asia during the same period. Asian area studies research is a collaborative process in which the ideas of many specialists must be brought together in a comparative fashion in order to enhance their particular value for understanding one society for the larger goal of explaining economic, cultural, and political change.

To understand contemporary Asian area studies scholarship, it is nec-

essary to be aware of the origins and development of the field. The form this scholarly activity has taken varies – the lone scholar, the group research project, the academic center, the government research institute, the multi-national agency. The focus of this scholarship also varies but normally concentrates on economic and political behaviour and institutions. Cultural, religious, and literary studies are also essential and I will come back to this point later.

What is often held now as the model of the area studies enterprise is the university department or center of Asian studies (or one of the sub-units of Asia, i. e., China, East Asia, South East Asia, Sri Lanka or whatever is thought important) or the semi-independent research institute such as the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore or the *Institut für Asienkunde* in Hamburg. My own institution, the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London, is perhaps one of the oldest of this type of institution, originally growing from the imperial role of Britain in the Middle East and beyond during and after the First World War. But most contemporary university and semi-independent institutions are products of the post-World War II era and have been modeled to a significant degree on American experience.<sup>2</sup>

The dominance of contemporary university-based area studies obscures the earlier origins of much of the scholarship on Asia and Africa. In Southeast Asian studies, the only Asian area studies field I am competent to discuss, much of the pioneering work was done by civil servants or colonial bureaucrats—agents, if you like, of imperialism (Anderson 1992). These were people who in the main lived and worked for most if not all of their professional careers in the countries of their respective government's empires. They often became highly competent in the languages and histories of these societies and their writings shaped to a significant extent not only the understanding by foreigners of these societies, but also that of indigenous academics and scholars with whom they worked and shared their ideas. The possibility of this kind of research is now largely gone because the historical and political relationships which allowed foreigners to work with freedom and independence have changed. This change, the consequence of nationalism and independence, must be borne in mind when thinking about the issues and research agendas that will be pursued in the coming decades for it is an

<sup>2</sup> Even the Centres for area studies at SOAS were established after the Hayter report in the early 1960s held the American model up as the one to be followed by British institutions.

important factor in determining what work is possible. What one is pointing to, of course, is the fact that the political and economic relationships which exist between societies, and the conditions within which their scholars work, is an important factor in determining what kinds of research are possible.

The point is exemplified in the transformation of Asian studies following the Second World War. With the rise of the global hegemony of the United States and the coincident decline of European and Asian empires, area studies entered a new phase, the phase which has become the model for contemporary foreign area scholarship. As the United States developed active relationships with much of the globe, now formally independent and holding seats in the United Nations, there was an active need on the part of the American government to know more about the politics, economies, and societies of the non-European world.<sup>3</sup> The response was to establish, with the encouragement and often the leadership of the great American foundations, area studies programs in the universities. There the enterprise took on its current form, usually the interdisciplinary center bringing together academics from a number of different disciplinary departments in a university to concentrate their research and some of their teaching on a particular country or region.

Asian area studies in this form generally concentrated on developing teaching at the post-graduate level and research on contemporary topics and issues in foreign societies. Modern history was usually a part of this, but the social sciences, especially political science and anthropology, played a significant role. Because of the professional biases and expectations of economists working primarily on the OECD countries, economics has played a less central role in area studies research than might have been expected. At the leading centers, language studies were also emphasized, but not the study of literature. Rather, the acquisition of the relevant language for the study of a society was seen as a research tool, a means of apprehending necessary data, and not directly as an object of study in itself. Curiously, while no one would consider that one had an adequate education in a European language and culture without being at least familiar with the central canon of classics in that language, this was not assumed to be essential in Asian area studies. Here the American

<sup>3</sup> Because of the bias of American higher education, reflecting American cultural norms of the period, the knowledge base which existed on Europe, the home of the majority of the ancestors of the Americans, was much stronger. Only the Cold War led to the development of the need to establish area studies directed at Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

model somewhat deviated from the European experience, where languages and literatures were often available as part of first degree programs, as well as at advanced levels.

As indicated earlier, area studies is one of the outcomes of the growing globalization of human activities and has been developed in the main as a means by which the more powerful states and societies of the world sought to understand other states and societies. An important recent development has been the emergence in Asian universities of institutes and programs to study American and European societies and cultures. This development in academic terms reflects the growing equalization of economic and political power relationships among the nations of East Asia, Europe and North America.

The first two major stages of the development of Asian area studies have now been eclipsed. It is inconceivable that 19th century-style colonialism can ever recur. The policy requirements of the Cold War and the rise of American hegemony have also passed. What are the issues which will concern Asian studies in the future and what will push some research topics to the fore while others, of equal intellectual importance, will remain unexplored? If, as I am contending, it is true that the impetus for area studies research grows from the requirements of governments and societies to understand different governments and societies in order to understand and influence, if not control, their policies and activities, then it can be assumed that more countries in Asia will wish to conduct area studies as the distribution of political and economic power across the globe becomes more even than it has been for more than two or three hundred years. That said, what will be the questions to which answers will be sought? Here, of course, the intellectual interests of the individuals who are conducting the studies will be crucial. And these are as likely to grow out of the concerns of their own society as out of the society being examined.

On the basis of the concerns of many people from across the world today, I would guess that the following issues will lie at the heart of Asian studies during the next decade and more. Some of these will be emphasized more in one country than in another. Different scholarly traditions and different resource constraints will determine how they are pursued and in what depth. The prospects are exciting, however, because of the development of many more centers and institutions involved in Asian studies, not only in Europe and America, but also in Asia itself.

Area studies is at its best very much an interdisciplinary activity, but for the sake of clarity of presentation and because of an inability on my

part to pull these issues together in a more coherent manner, I propose to suggest that the major issues that will concern us in the intermediate future can be grouped into several traditional disciplinary categories: politics and government, economics, sociological and anthropological studies, and cultural and literary studies. These categories are neither mutually exclusive nor comprehensive, but they perhaps provide a simplified guide to thought.

In looking to the future research agenda for Asian studies, one cannot but be guided by current concerns and to make an assumption that many of these current concerns will continue for some time. Certainly the research potential of a number of the topics I am about to suggest is inexhaustible, and some of these topics have been at the heart of area studies research since the enterprise began, even if couched in different and perhaps now politically incorrect language.

Take the area of political and governmental research. Here reside a number of topics about which governments are often keen to sponsor research on their neighbours and real or potential rivals, but less keen to have their own circumstances studied from the same critical stance. Among the issues which seem to be of interest now are included topics related to the law and systems of laws. How societies conceive, value, and protect property and human rights varies, though few non-professional commentators stop to consider the political implications of contrasting traditions and circumstances. The various Asian traditions of law are certainly rarely concerned in Western discourse with the legal requirements of capitalist and democratic societies. Whether these traditions have a future is a question worthy of exploration.

One research issue that has been greatly exercising political scientists working on Southeast and East Asia in recent years is whether there is a causal link between class formation and political change in societies undergoing rapid economic development. The literature on this is growing (Morley 1993) and debate on this question has involved Asian studies with some of the central questions raised by Marxian and Weberian theory on the late 19th and early 20th century in Europe. The dominating concern of this issue stems, however, not just from its inherent intellectual interest, great as that is, but also from a political motivation. The American and West European governments have since the end of the Cold War reverted more fully to their pre-Cold War stance on the granting of aid and assistance to developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well as Europe itself. If regimes are not seen to be democratic in some fairly loose sense, aid is withheld. This then raises



the question, however, that if aid is withheld, will these societies be able to develop their economies sufficiently that a democratically-minded middle class will emerge to demand human and political rights for all the population? And then, even if such a class does emerge, will it necessarily always insist on elected civilian governments or will not its own interests sometimes be coincident with military and/or authoritarian government, at least for a time? There is much speculation on this issue and still a great deal of research to be done.

With the rise of the debate over the rise of middle classes as a consequence of economic growth and the related phenomenon of the installation of civilian governments, research on the political role of the military has somewhat fallen into abeyance, but as a historical as well as contemporary research topic, there is still a great deal we do not know. Western political theory for several centuries has posited that the subordination of the military to civilian power is normal and proper, but the traditions of few societies in Asia or Europe suggest that this has long been the case. How armies are controlled and who controls them in particular historical circumstances is a subject still open to thorough research in most of Asia.

Research in the means by which governments develop and implement their foreign policies and relations, as well as their military strategies and tactics will, I contend, become a more central issue in area studies research in the future. The reason for this is the collapse of the political certainties which guided foreign policy analysts during the Cold War. It did not make much difference how Thailand or Bangladesh determined their international interests during the Cold War. As long as they were clearly on one side or the other of the Cold War divide, the logic of policy toward them was clear. But those conditions are now gone and the development of a multi-polar international order requires much more specific knowledge of all the countries of a region than has been the case since the 1950s.

Permit me to say a few more words about Asian studies and politics, for that is my field. Those involved in other disciplines would share my dilemma in wishing to say the most about what we know a bit more about. But I think my persistence here has an important implication beyond my own discipline. One of the great virtues of area studies is that it reveals the often Eurocentric bias of most social science disciplines. Our methods and our questions have often arisen from the study of European and American topics. Political theory is perhaps the most culpable of these activities. By forcing political theory to grapple with Asian traditions and experiences, a more human and universal set of theoretical

propositions should emerge, better illuminating Europe and America as well as Asian societies.

As a discipline, professional economics more than the other social sciences tends to operate in isolation (or ignorance) of the cultural and historical circumstances of the economy it is analysing. This is obviously important at one level of macro-analysis, but in many parts of Asia, the reliability of the data on which economists advance their arguments has been doubtful. That is often the case outside of Asia as well. But in its area studies mode, economics, often called political economy, can be highly illuminating of specific issues. Public policy analysis is one such area. Development studies is another. These sub-fields of economics have prompted in Asian studies a debate previously heard in European and Latin American studies over the nature of capitalism and the role of the state in generating growth and development. As in the debate over class formation and the perceived or hoped for rise of democracy in Asian societies, this debate is capable of being obscured by wishful ideological thinking. The free marketeers of economics, like the end of history advocates in political studies, would have us believe the truth of their ideological pronouncements before we have examined the empirical data. Area studies is at base an empirical activity and this should keep us from being swallowed in some one else's own idea of how the world should work.

As a sub-field of economics, demographic studies are clearly crucial for Asian area studies into the next century. The structures of labor forces, and the demands populations make on governments and resources, will be essential for intelligent policy planning. Not only must governments know the implications of their own and their neighbours population trends, but the larger political public should be aware in order to ensure that in the short term perspective which dominates government horizons, long term and potentially explosive problems are not overlooked. Such questions force area studies specialists to think further and to examine a number of issues of great complexity but of equal importance, such as agricultural and industrial productivity, pricing regimes, and the like.

While these may seem to be essentially technical subjects, the best area studies research in the fields of anthropology and sociology and their cognate human sciences have shown this not to be the case. In a number of areas, such as medical studies, anthropologists have begun to make clear the human and perceptual/conceptual basis of much of what is often thought of as scientific in an abstract, supra-determinate form. As

societies become more complex and borrow increasingly from other societies modes of health treatment and medical analysis, understanding the bases of reason which lie behind techniques is obviously essential.

Such studies, showing how people perceive themselves in relationship to activities around them, have larger, more normally understood political implications as well. The rise of ethnicity as a political factor at the end of the Cold War in Europe has obviously raised the question of the formation of human identity. Certainly Southeast Asian history demonstrated in the last century the plasticity of human identity but also, in many circumstances, its power in political affairs. Separatist movements and other forms of politicized ethnicity as so strongly demonstrated in India in recent years point to an important area of future research.

Identity is often tied to concepts of religion. These are the most personal of human concerns and are incapable of change by force or legislation. But we actually know very little about how people think within their own religious traditions. There is a great danger of assuming that either on the basis of how we think about religion ourselves, or on the study of the key texts of another religious tradition, we can actually understand how other people see their religious beliefs in terms of social action. The potential for misunderstanding in this area is enormous, as can be seen by the fears that alleged actions of one religious community or movement can generate, even on the other side of the globe, in the minds of others. The study of religions in order to understand their own frames of reference and purpose in reality, as opposed to in myth, is a research topic which the world probably cannot afford to ignore.

The linkage of area studies to contemporary concerns is shown dramatically in the emergence of gender studies in the past several decades. It does no credit to the people, largely men, who have developed these fields of studies that the importance of gender relations in different societies for understanding human action was ignored for so long. However, as with the study of religions, ethnicity, class, or public policy, these are questions imbedded in the society of the observer as well as the observed, and one must therefore be aware of the different perceptions people bring to these topics, and the potential for misunderstanding that results.

As in many of the areas of research I am so cursorily noting, it is impossible for me to know enough to speak with great confidence on any of these points and I am certain that others will argue that on a number of issues I am wrong. But I would venture that I am probably correct in stating that one of the fields of Asian studies least researched is educa-

tion. It is remarkable how many statements of alleged fact are advanced about the importance of education in the East Asian economic success stories, for example, that are based on little more than comparative national statistics on educational expenditure. The nature of that expenditure is partially known, but the cultural and societal basis of knowledge and learning remain to be more thoroughly researched in a comparative and dispassionate manner.

A number of the potential research issues I have alluded to have been concerned with questions of resources. These questions obviously raise in our minds questions so frequently discussed these days as ecology and the environment. As with medical-related studies, however, it would be misleading to think about such questions outside their local settings. The value of forests and the utility of water supplies may look very different to people situated in different positions, inside and outside of a society and its traditions. But given the global concerns that have arisen in the past few decades, Asian studies cannot be divorced from issues of resource management. A bringing of the two together, combining the insights in the area studies specialist with the technical knowledge of the natural scientists, might lead to a higher level of debate and more achievable environmental management policies than has been the case up to now.

One of the great strengths of the first tradition of Asian studies was its concern for cultural and literary studies. The key texts and inscriptions of ancient and contemporary societies were closely studied in order to gain insights into the cultures and traditions of the people of a particular society and region. The second phase of Asian studies tended to pay less attention to such studies, though it relied heavily on their results in shaping some central assumptions about the social world being observed. But contemporary social science and non-literary studies tended to predominate. In the meantime, it has become apparent that understanding contemporary popular culture is essential as an aspect of area studies.

In societies undergoing rapid change, these studies are often one of the more accessible means of understanding the forces that are shaping peoples' lives. But it should not be assumed that these forces exist on their own and with a power of their own. They are themselves the products of the class and political structures of the society in which they exist and should be understood in that light. In the future, one can expect that Asian studies will pay as much attention to the theatre, cinema, music, and popular literature of societies as to their great historical texts and monuments. In that sense, Asian studies will become more like the tradi-

tions of contemporary European studies.

You will have noticed that in setting forth some topics that I think may form part of the research agenda for Asian studies during the next few decades, I have placed great emphasis on contemporary issues. This is perhaps inevitable given the link between area studies and political concerns. But it is important to remember that these contemporary issues cannot be properly and fully understood outside of their historical context. All human activities should be put into historical and comparative perspective and therefore historical research will remain a powerful and essential sector of basic research in Asian studies.

This concern for history returns us to where this essay began. I suggested then that there is an intimate link between the development of area studies and the globalization of human life. This is a truism so obvious that it perhaps did not need to be mentioned. But it does help us to see that globalization has been a part of the emergence of modernity and that Asian area studies is therefore involved with understanding in all its facets the comparative nature of change in modern life. It is the comparative aspect of area studies that gives the field its intellectual power. Without that it is in danger of becoming sterile, merely inventory lists of different cupboards situated around the globe. Dynamic area studies advances explanations and hypotheses about the nature of other societies in order to better understand our own. In order to do that effectively, Asian studies must be rooted in language studies. Asian studies is not merely a question of translating one culture's words into those of another. It is about explaining the meaning of those words in their original but changing context.

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