

ASIA: THE WOOD AND THE TREES

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Abstract

The study of Asia badly needs a paradigm shift. The difficulty is to manage its diversity. Merely to establish more centres for Asian studies within the continent is not the answer. It is more important to examine how the subject is being taught. It may appear that what ought to be advocated is an Asian-centric approach to the study of Asian societies. This same call was made at least half a century ago but the results have been disappointing because while this may sound right, it must be borne in mind that the traditional Asian approach to education has certain in-built weaknesses. An Asian-centric approach should not be an endeavour to revive and preserve the past even if it is no longer relevant. It should mean that common cultural practices in Asian societies should be carefully explained, not by assigning reasons which are culled from the cultural practices of other societies but by identifying, as accurately as possible, local beliefs even if they appear illogical.

Keywords: Asia, Asian studies, civilization, Asian cultures

'Asia' is a term which can confuse more than enlighten. That it refers geographically to a huge land mass - the largest of all the continents - does not pose a problem, boundary disputes between or among Asian countries notwithstanding. But its ethnic diversity - its inhabitants account for about 56 percent of the world's total population - is mind-boggling. There are significant differences not only among the people of the numerous nation-states located in Asia but also among territorial groups which belong to the same state - for instance, between the Kerinci of Sumatra and the Banjarese of Kalimantan - both these groups are likely to be unknown to people outside the Malay Archipelago.

Not so long ago, there were serious discussions regarding the term "Asian values" which Asian leaders in particular sometimes like to use usually in answer to accusations that certain governments in Asian countries tend to resort to undemocratic methods. To the West, the methods adopted by some Asian leaders constitute an infringement of human rights. Not surprisingly, there have been various interpretations with regard to the meaning of "Asian values". Certain Asian leaders are said to imply that because most Asian systems of government, traditionally, tended to be autocratic, this could be deemed an aspect of "Asian values" and should therefore be acceptable. However, in Western eyes, its perpetuation is considered a challenge to liberal democracy. Others argue that the idea of liberty was not unknown to people in Asia.²

Democracy and Asian Values

As it often happens, debates tend to revolve around semantics though it is undeniable that the system of government extolled today, called “democracy” with all its paraphernalia, is basically a Western invention. But it is equally true that there were traditional societies in Asia which functioned on the principle of consensus. One of these was the Minangkabau society in Sumatra, Indonesia. In that society, social stratification was not sharp. Its social philosophy at the community level was: *yang baik adalah budi, yang indah adalah bahasa* (literally, that which is good is character; that which is beautiful is language). Indeed, *budi bahasa* means good manners. Its political system was summed up in the phrase: *beraja ke muafakat* meaning that the king owed his position to the people; as a consequence, he and the people were of the same status.³ But there was no major kingdom in Asia in the past which subscribed to the idea of “government of the people, by the people, for the people”.

That there should be debates on the meaning of “Asian values” is not surprising because Asia, like Europe or Africa or Latin America, as mentioned earlier, though a continent (in other words a continuous expanse of land with a defined boundary), is demographically made up of a myriad territorial-cultural groups. It is common sense that they do not all subscribe to the same values just as they do not all eat food cooked in the same way. To a large extent, scholars who have a propensity to abstract and to encapsulate have contributed to this tendency to see only the wood and not the trees forgetting that, without the trees, there can be no wood. This often is the result of attempts to avoid dealing with details which some scholars find difficult to handle.

The European Union, however, seems well aware of Asia’s diversity for it pointed out several years ago that: “The term “Asia” is an over-simplification: Asia is not a single region. The 26 Asian countries discussed in the present Communication have different cultural traditions and different social, economic, and political profiles, even if industrialization is making some of these differences less marked than in the past.”⁴

Asia’s diversity

There have been innumerable studies of the land and people of Asia but, even in Asia, very few when using the term ‘Asians’ are fully conscious that they are talking about people whose cultures can be either radically different or contain considerable variations. But there is an observable tendency among scholars to pay attention mainly to common denominators. That basically is a favoured approach among governments too because every country in Asia is, to a greater or lesser extent, concerned with problems of national unity. But if ethnic or cultural differences, even within one nation, exceed commonalities or if they are at least easily observable, for a scholar to ignore the differences is to defeat the very purpose for undertaking the study of the society concerned.

It is not far-fetched to say that very few people in Asia have the opportunity to acquire in-depth cross-cultural experiences. Certainly scholars are among the few; so are travellers, some of whom spend long periods in a particular society visiting even remote places to observe the daily lives of ordinary people. Scholars, unfortunately, often do not keep an open mind. They arrive with the intention of trying to test a particular perception or theory as a result of which they often exclude that which

tends to disprove rather than support their preconceived ideas. There are also scholars who repeatedly visit one particular village and, as a result, acquire immense local knowledge but the geographical expanse of their knowledge is very limited and, therefore, it does not help in the understanding of the wider society..

For example, to study Chettinad in Tamil Nadu cannot help the scholar concerned understand Tamil Nadu comprehensively. Nor can a study of Hainan island contribute to a comprehensive understanding of Guangdong province in China. The same principle is applicable to the study of other societies in Asia or in fact elsewhere. Ethnic diversity is not necessarily the result of the extensiveness of a geographical area. Malaysia is certainly not less culturally complex than China. Even small societies like Sri Lanka and Singapore are culturally diverse. But while cultural-religious diversity has caused almost unmanageable political instability in Sri Lanka, it has not caused serious upheaval in Singapore though it does not alter the fact that ethnicity in Singapore is a problem which the government realizes has to be handled delicately.

China and India are not just physically but also demographically huge. Since early times, the people from both these countries have spilled over to many other Asian countries. However, there are more Chinese in Southeast Asia than Indians and the reverse is true in the case of West Asia. But, surprisingly, throughout history, there had been very little large-scale movement of people between the two countries, the existence of the Silk Road notwithstanding. The route was important for trade and it facilitated the spread of Buddhism to China, but there was no migration in either direction. Indeed, even in modern times, the people of both these countries have rarely met. Although it is true that, through Buddhism, the Chinese have absorbed some elements of Indian culture (mysticism, for example), the people of both countries know very little of each other. Moreover, there was a period when Buddhism declined in India. But neither Hinduism nor Sikhism has a direct influence on the Chinese.

However, in more recent years, a large number of Chinese from Malaysia, Hong Kong and Taiwan, involved in the Sathya Sai Baba movement,⁵ annually visit Puttapparthi in India. But the movement does not have an influential presence in China. The cultural gap existing between Indians and Chinese is so wide that even in England or the United States as well as other Western countries where Indian and Chinese migrants have settled down, there is no close rapport between them. Each ethnic group tends to create its own social enclave. It is in fact in Malaysia and Singapore that Chinese and Indians intermingle and intermarry most easily.

Scholars in general have found it convenient to divide Asia into five regions: West Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia. The division is based on both geography and culture. It would not be far-fetched to say that geography, in the past, had a bearing on culture in the sense that close proximity which often led to hegemonic control being extended from one area to another resulted in shared values and lifestyles, sometimes even languages though not without variations. For example, the people of Mindanao in southern Philippines, a large proportion of whom are Muslims, are also culturally more similar to the people of Indonesia than the Filipinos of northern Philippines, the majority of whom are Catholics.

There are times when it is unclear how one language influenced another. This is certainly true of the relationship between Tamil and the Japanese languages. Tamil is the older of the two.⁶ There are also languages which had apparently the same origin but developed in separate directions. Malay is one of them. It is generally said to be

the *lingua franca* of about half the 500 million population of Southeast Asia because it is the basic language of the indigenous people of the Malay Archipelago who are found primarily in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Mindanao (Philippines) and Pattani (Thailand). But today the language spoken by each territorial group is not necessarily intelligible to another.

Scholarly interest in Asia

Scholarly interest in Asia has grown since the end of World War II. In the aftermath of the war which presumably witnessed the triumph of democracy over dictatorship, the West which had almost overrun the whole of Asia publicly accepted that decolonisation was the right policy to adopt. Western aggrandizement had begun in the 15th century. Its supposed demise not surprisingly inspired many Western scholars themselves to write on the subject. Moreover, as K.M. Pannikar remarked:

Till the period of European dominance over Asia, there was no Asian history as such. Asia consisted of three cultural areas, the Islamic, the Hindu-Buddhist and the Sinic, each continental in its proportions. Separated by deserts and impassable mountains, the relations between these areas were limited and intermittent. The dominance which the Western nations exercised over them in the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth gave to Asian political developments a unity which entitles it to be considered a definitive period of history.⁷

Pannikar himself was of course the author of *Asia and Western Dominance (1498-1945)*,⁸ a book which was much discussed until the 1960s at least, and inspired many young Asian scholars to look at Asian history in particular with greater cultural independence. But this has been fraught with difficulties until even today. The problem was pointed out three decades ago by another scholar of Asian society, Robert F. Spencer, who observed that as a result of a long period of Western domination:

... Asians have been forced into the Western mold of nation with all the legalistic, organizational, economic, industrial, and military adaptations that this implies. In many instances, this has demanded a high price, especially since modernism, in the sense of Westernization, either conflicts with tradition or requires the reorganization of traditional patterns of thought, belief, and behavior. Add to this the problems of demography and poverty and the issues become complex indeed.⁹

The mention of poverty is especially pertinent. Although there is general awareness among scholars working on Asia (as a whole or any part of it) that poverty has had far-reaching consequences on societies in Asia,¹⁰ few pay particular attention to it. On the contrary, there is a marked tendency to focus on business, GNP growth and high profile politics. For example, Samuel Huntington's famous book, *Clash of Civilizations*, has received far greater attention than the large number of Asians living in appalling conditions even before the financial crisis of 1997.

Some of Southeast Asia's major cities - Manila, Bangkok and Jakarta in particular - find squatter problems practically insurmountable. Even the comparatively more modern Ho Chi Minh city suffers from the same malady. On the one hand it is described as "a bustling, dynamic and industrious centre"; the streets are said to be: '... a myriad

of shops, stalls, stands-on-wheels and vendors selling wares from blankets on sidewalks. The traffic roars. The jackhammers of progress pound the past into pulp, the city churns, ferments, bubbles and fumes.' On the other hand, like many of the cities in the region, it has been reported that: '... Ho Chi Minh's streets are filled to bursting with poverty and sadness. "Rural refugees" continue flocking to the city, attracted by the surface glitter. Few find the pot of gold. That the city is developing is without question. The big question is 'developing into what?''¹¹

More recently, interest in Asia has shifted somewhat to terrorism, a subject which is not very different from 'clash of civilizations' and it has confused even the better educated in each Asian country because their knowledge of global developments is derived largely from Western scholarship as well as media. Many do not realize that they need seriously to differentiate between the apparent and the real.

Importance of economics

The high priority given to corporate economics is even more obvious. The daily news (electronic as well as print media) provide ample information on business. *Bloomberg*, *Forbes*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Financial Times* are among many others, the local media included, which allow the business sector to keep continuously abreast of the movement of prices as well as other relevant data. Even education today is highly commercialized. Attempts have been made to corporatise it. Whereas in the past, education was thought of as a means basically to promote human values and creativity (in Britain MBBS students before World War II had to do a BA first), it is now a business and those involved in it are expected to maximize profit. Parents and students are said to be clients buying products sold by educational institutions whose main duty is to satisfy the customers. In this instance, it means making sure that the students receive what they want - formal qualifications not necessarily knowledge.

Economics continues to be the major consideration in international relations. It is, for example, the main factor shaping Europe's policy towards Asia. The need for a new strategy towards Asia, after the end of the Cold War, was highlighted as far back as 1994 as follows:

The rise of Asia is dramatically changing the world balance of economic power. By the year 2000, the World Bank estimates that half the growth in the global economy will come from the East and Southeast Asia alone. This growth will ensure that by the year 2000 one billion Asians will have significant consumer spending power and of these, 400 million will have average disposable incomes as high, if not higher, than their European or US contemporaries.¹²

The European Union needs therefore to accord Asia higher priority. It needs as a matter of urgency to strengthen its economic presence in Asia in order to maintain its leading role in the world economy. The establishment of a strong, co-ordinated presence in the different regions of Asia will allow Europe to prevent its economic situation from further deterioration.

However, while it is true that, numerically, the affluent in Asia has grown in number and therefore there is greater spending power, the number of those who are able merely to eke out a living has not radically diminished¹³ because Asia's population has continued to increase in absolute numbers even if the rate has declined and

the cost of living tends to rise when there is greater development. India, a country believed to have 350-400 million of its population living barely above poverty line, and 75 percent in the rural areas,¹⁴ has now strengthened its economy and continues to race with China, the other country with a huge population, to become financially the most stable nation in the world. Although both countries at this juncture are enjoying a high rate of economic development, the high population growth also places both countries in a delicate position as economic development cannot be endlessly maintained. A severe downturn would create enormous problems. In India the rising cost of living has brought hardship to many.

However, important as politics and economics are, to study primarily the political-economic elite or to focus on esoteric issues in the study of any society, even the United States, unavoidably produces a lop-sided view of the national scenario. This is not to deny that decision-making in terms of national and external policies are extremely important in determining the well-being of a society. But merely to concentrate on the activities of the government of a country is to see the society devoid of the majority of its population, and this must lead to serious distortions for it cannot be assumed that government decisions always reflect the wishes of the people at large. Often the leadership could have a very different agenda from that made known to the general populace which, in the case of Asian countries, are usually not well educated.

Similarly, merely to address esoteric issues in the study of Asia is to perceive a society through the eyes of the highly-educated comprising, in more recent times, those educated in the West. Yet those schooled in the literature of scholarly studies on Asian societies are apt to be at sixes and sevens when thrown into the midst of the general populace in most Asian countries for there is usually such a major difference between the common people (primarily those little exposed to Western thoughts and culture) and the elite who are usually well exposed to Western ethos.

Because politics and corporate economics are given such overwhelming importance these days, disciplines which are more oriented towards other aspects of human thoughts and behaviour tend to be marginalized. In many Asian societies today, a degree in M.B.A. is almost as valuable as a degree in medicine or engineering which used to be the preferred disciplines for those pursuing higher education. And because so much credence is placed on the physical sciences (applied more than pure), disciplines dealing with human attitudes and proclivities are now artificially transformed into sciences which presume, by resorting to the use of clinical-analytical models, to be able to make predictions. The results verge on confusion (it takes just one sudden SARS attack to demolish all the careful calculations of econometricians) whereas often a simple description, based on close observations, would prove more informative, and it is accurate information which contributes towards a better understanding of any particular cultural scenario.

Asian religions

Religions, Asia's major contribution to the world, ironically, have long been the main cause of conflicts in world history. As a result, there have been vigorous intellectual attempts made to understand religions which are of singular importance in almost every Asian country. While it may seem necessary to begin by engaging in an abstruse definition of religion, it is imperative to bear in mind that, among Asia's majority,

the understanding of religion is very superficial. Hinduism, for instance, cannot be fully digested without a sound command of Sanskrit, a language understood by very few in the world now and not all members of this small group are Hindus. Therefore, in Asia, religious rituals are faithfully observed without questions asked and if justifications have to be given, the answers proffered are usually meant to intimidate in order to illicit obedience. It is for that reason too that it is difficult to convince the majority that sometimes their religious beliefs cannot be supported by even simple logic. But these are the very same people who can be induced to react passionately *vis-à-vis* issues which are seen to be antagonistic to their own religious convictions.

In all religions, there are leaders, locally or nationally, who have a powerful influence over their followers. In Asia where education is calculated not primarily to enlighten but to induce people to behave in a particular way, very often there is no consciousness of the existence of a thin line between right and wrong. For reasons which are almost impossible to explain, it is easier to urge people to harbour hatred towards others than to "love thy neighbour as thyself". One often hears the slogan "Peace is possible" and "Road Map to Peace" but where has there been a point in time in human history when complete peace has prevailed throughout the world?

It is not far-fetched to say that the extent to which the people of one particular society are able to have a well-rounded perception of those of another society depends on the opportunities available to those of one society to gain knowledge of the other. In this respect, education has a very crucial role to play. The sooner young children are introduced to places and societies outside their own, the sooner they will be able to acquire a perspective of the broader world. However, where the scope and boundary of education are limited, as in most Asian countries owing to the lack of modern facilities as well as the continuing belief that the main duty of each student is to remember accurately rather than understand what the teacher or mentor has said, it is difficult for the young to obtain knowledge of the world outside their own.

Even where some attempts have been made to include the study of the outside world in the school curriculum, as in the case of Malaysia, cultural segmentation within the country itself continues to be marked. Malaysians (made up of numerous ethnic groups), in general, are not very well aware of one another's culture. Many Chinese Malaysians, for instance, cannot distinguish between Punjabis and Bengalis. It would be too much to expect them to distinguish between Mandailing and Minangkabau although both these groups are present in Malaysia as well as Sumatra.

Similarly, it is difficult for the Malays to distinguish among the several Chinese territorial-dialect groups. Although it is true that today, within the Chinese community in Malaysia, such differences no longer present the same difficulties in intra-ethnic social relations as before, it is interesting to note that territorial-dialect as well as surname associations have not become defunct. This is even more surprising considering that, in Malaysia, there have been concerted attempts made to promote mandarin (which is based on the Beijing/Manchu dialect and since the Revolution of 1911 has been the standard speech for China) among the younger generation of Chinese to the exclusion of the dialects. With the increasing stress placed on the science and technology components in the curriculum, and the tendency to de-emphasize cultural studies, it cannot be expected that students will be able to acquire the desirable cross-cultural knowledge.

Even then, compared to Malaysians and Singaporeans, the people of other countries in Asia are even less conveniently placed as to be able to fraternize or at least mingle with those who are descended from people of various other Asian countries although the more recent tendency for the nationals of certain Asian countries to seek employment in foreign countries has helped, to an important extent, to broaden the mental horizon of people in many of the poorer Asian countries. For instance, Indonesian and Filipino workers (especially domestic aids) have gone as far west as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. They have also gone to Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan. A large number are present in Malaysia and Singapore too. Apart from sending back money to their own countries, they also bring home information about other countries while at the same time giving useful information about their own countries to people in places where they are employed.

In this respect, Malaysia is probably the country in the world which has had the longest experience as the recipient of immigrants from three of the world's largest countries - China, India and Indonesia. Indeed, Malaysia's population today has reached the figure of about 27 million because, between the early 19th century and the mid-1930s, there was almost an uncontrolled movement of immigrants into the country. At present, immigration is closely monitored in Singapore, Malaysia's neighbour.

In Malaysia, too, nationals of China and India can no longer easily obtain employment in certain sectors. By comparison, Singapore is more liberal. But foreign workers, from many other countries (in particular, more lately, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, and Vietnam) still have relatively easy access to Malaysia and Singapore. This new wave of labour movement began in about the early 1970s when these two countries took steps to boost economic growth. Since then both have depended heavily on foreign labour to reduce the cost of production in many sectors. Even then, except for those who have had the means to travel to various parts of Asia, for one reason or another, knowledge of other Asian countries is basically scanty among Malaysians and Singaporeans.

Asian studies

There is not a great deal being done among Asian countries - notwithstanding the large number of international organizations existing in which Asian countries are officially involved - to enable a greater proportion of the people in each country to gain an informed perspective of the cultural diversity existing in other countries. Too many of the organizations within Asia are dependent on financial support from outside the continent. They are unable to organize activities independently, not even regular conferences, to enable a greater number of Asian scholars to meet one another in order to exchange ideas on a more sustained basis. Japan is an important exception in some ways. But, unfortunately, Japan's economy today is not comparable to that of yesteryears. It no longer plays such a prominent part in sponsoring academic research among Southeast Asian scholars.

While there are numerous Asian Studies centres in the West (including Australia and New Zealand), so very few exist in Asia itself. The result is that these days when Asians study Asia, the questions they pose are often those posed by Westerners for Asian students have long since preferred, given the choice, to further their education

at the post-graduate level in the West in both the natural sciences and the human disciplines.

Gerald Fry's comment that "Minnesota seemed to have so little on Southeast Asia, yet so many students from that area"¹⁵ is very significant. It demonstrates that, until recently at least, the students from Southeast Asia studying in the University of Minnesota failed to provide useful information to the university *vis-à-vis* the countries of their origins. This is not surprising as Asian students, in general, are mainly interested in seeking "correct answers" (in other words, prescribed answers) not in imparting information.

Even Japan has a tendency to seek knowledge about Asia from the West. The annual Asian Studies Conference there, for instance, was initially dominated by Western scholars including a few who are Asian scholars based in the West. Some of the Western scholars are teaching in Japan itself. The themes are quite clearly Japan-centric but viewed from a Western perspective. A few examples will suffice.¹⁶ In 1998, the following presented papers on Japanese religion: Sarah Horton from Yale University, Clark Chilson from the University of Stirling, and William Londo from the University of Michigan. Meera Visvanathan who presented an interesting paper entitled "On Shrine Maidens, Mountain Witches, and Prostitutes: A Topographical History of Women and the Uncanny in the Writings of Orikuchi Shinobu" was from Brown University. In the panel on Southeast Asia, the more important papers were those by: Eric Thompson ("A Malay Village in a Tiger Economy") from the University of Washington, and Jochen Legewie ("The Political Economy of Industrial Integration in Southeast Asia: the Role of Japanese Companies") from the German Institute for Japanese Studies.

In subsequent years, more Japanese scholars began to participate and there was a slightly higher representation from other Asian countries. Scholars from Western universities who presented papers in 1999 included: Jennifer Amyx ("Intra-Ministerial Dynamics of Japan's Ministry of Finance: the Salience of Formal Institutional Structure") of the Australian National University, and Ed Friedman ("Transcending the East-West Binary") of the University of Wisconsin-Madison while, in 2001, Julian Go of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, presented a paper on "Domesticating Governance: Filipino Elite Political Ideology during Late Spanish Rule". Although the number of Western scholars has declined, the number of scholars from Asian countries has not patently increased and preference for the study of the elite and the esoteric remains little changed.

Consciously or unconsciously, when speaking of Asia, both scholars and journalists at the international level are preoccupied with a handful of countries. Today China continue to hog the limelight. Increasing attention is also being paid to India not only because it has nuclear weapons but it has, in addition, made a major impact in the field of IT and it has lately achieved impressive economic growth.¹⁷ Since 1997, Indonesia, Asia's third largest country, has practically paled into insignificance because of domestic turmoil and also because greater attention is being paid to ASEAN seen as economically a vibrant entity. But for those who visit Indonesia, it is clear that the country has achieved significant progress. The society today is comparatively much more stable.

As for West Asia, it tends to be seen today in terms of so-called Islamic fundamentalism or militant Islam, and it is believed to have strong links with the Al-Qaeda. In short, the perception of Asia is based primarily, as mentioned earlier, on

either economic performance (or the lack of it) or the outbreak of political conflict within a country or between countries especially if the United States takes a direct interest in it. Lately, with the masses overthrowing strong political regimes, it may happen that other Asian countries will ape West Asia.

As mentioned earlier, scholars are no longer independent agents but have to function according to the needs of the State for, in Asian countries in particular, it is the State primarily which has to make the move to establish research centres for scholarly studies. But most Asian governments are either too poor or not predisposed to sponsor research activities especially of a cultural nature. Unlike in the United States (for example, in 2001, the Archibald Bush Foundation provided a grant of \$899,935 to the University of Minnesota to increase study abroad and international curriculum)¹⁸, the rich and famous in Asia do not believe in contributing to research if it does not bring substantial financial returns directly or indirectly. In late February, 2004, the commercial firms in Malaysia subscribed about RM 8 million to make it possible for Mariah Carey's Charmbracelet Concert to be held in Kuala Lumpur.¹⁹ They would not contribute even one per cent of that sum to sponsor academic or cultural research. However, it must be acknowledged that they are also generous when religious organizations solicit support.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Asia's religious and cultural diversity cannot be easily comprehended by even the better educated. Seasoned scholars themselves will find it difficult to grasp all its intricacies. But it is not impossible to make people aware of the need to ask questions whenever they are confronted by a situation which is alien to them, instead of drawing conclusions based on inadequate information. And the required information is not forthcoming unless there is support for ongoing research and, certainly not less important, the avenue to disseminate important findings. But local publishers in general, in many Asian countries, are indifferent to scholarly works preferring to publish school text-books which have a considerably bigger market. The result is that promising young scholars in Asia, unless they are promoted overseas, often remain unknown, and their works are read by, if at all, only their students.

Scholars of Asian societies themselves, naturally, are not spared the need to ask searching questions continually which they can do only if they allow themselves to be fully exposed to a large number of the countries contained within Asia. Merely reading the works written by fellow scholars is insufficient because there are numerous scholars who presume to write on Asia without having directly acquired an extensive local knowledge of more than a couple of Asian societies. These, in their writings, unavoidably leave out whatever they do not have personal knowledge of.

In brief, the study of Asia badly needs a paradigm shift. The difficulty, to reiterate, is to manage its diversity. Merely to establish more centres for Asian studies within the continent is not the answer. It is more important to examine how the subject is being taught. It may appear that what ought to be advocated is an Asian-centric approach to the study of Asian societies. This same call was made at least half a century ago but the results have been disappointing because while this may sound right, it must be borne in mind that the traditional Asian approach to education has certain in-built weaknesses. An Asian-centric approach should not be an endeavour to revive and preserve the past even if it is no longer relevant. It should mean that common cultural practices in Asian societies should be carefully explained, not by assigning reasons

which are culled from the cultural practices of other societies but by identifying, as accurately as possible, local beliefs even if they appear illogical. For example, Chinese businessmen who want to start business place greater faith on the prognosis of an astrologer or palmist or medium than in a professor of business administration. To ignore this in explaining Chinese business methods is to provide a flawed exposition of what is in fact a common practice not just among Chinese businessmen but also among Asians in general who plan to get married.

Because of Asia's complexity, there is a great deal that Malaysia and Singapore can do to help bridge the existing knowledge gaps. This is particularly true of China and India which now appear anxious to improve bilateral ties. Cultural differences between the two are so extensive that young scholars on both sides wanting to obtain in-depth information of each other's culture will need to have preliminary exposure in an environment which is not so starkly contrasting. They can easily obtain guidance from those rich in the relevant cross-cultural experiences.

As the study of Asia is now too much dictated by the agenda set by politicians, those who seek to do more independent work are likely to find themselves marginalized. Admittedly, there are still scholars who steadfastly prefer to pursue knowledge on a broader basis rather than seek fame by focusing on high profile politics and economics. Knowledge and politics, at any rate, are not necessarily opposing poles. But it is common sense that they do not always cohere. From time to time, the scholar needs to look elsewhere but unless the elites in Asia develop a deeper sense of responsibility towards society rather than stubbornly upholding the principle of the maximization of profit, the study of Asia will remain primarily a domain dominated by the West for no other reason than that Asians themselves are not interested in encouraging a more independent study of Asia.

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Notes

- 1 Prof. Dr Khoo Kay Kim is Emeritus Professor at the Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya.
- 2 For a discussion of this issue, see, for example, Amartya Sen, 'Human Rights and Asian Values,' *The New Republic*, July 14-July 21, 1997.
- 3 See "Minangkabau Culture" http://coci.itb.ac.id/sumbar_culture.htm
- 4 http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/asem/asem_process/com94.htm
- 5 He is one of the most revered spiritual teachers in the world today and is also variously known as Sai Baba, Swami, Bhagavan, or simply Baba to millions of people (of all faiths and races) in the world. He was born on Nov. 23, 1926, in Puttaparthi, a remote village in the state of Andhra Pradesh in southern India.
- 6 Susumu Ohno, "The Genealogy of the Japanese Language", <http://arutkural.tripod.com./tolcampus/jap-teamil.htm>
- 7 Foreword in Jan Romein, *The Asian Century: A History of Modern Nationalism in Asia*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1962, p. 5. (English Translation by R.T. Clark)
- 8 First published in London in 1953.
- 9 Robert F. Spencer, *Religion and Change in Contemporary Asia*, University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis, 1971, p. 5.
- 10 According to a UN Development Programme report, poverty means more than simply not having money for minimal survival needs. It means a denial of opportunities and choices most basic to human development - "to lead a long, healthy, creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and respect from others." Poverty, it adds, affects all aspects of the nation's life. It affects the environment, education, housing, nutrition and agriculture, etc. ("Poverty in China" http://www.unchina.org/about_china/html/poverty.shtml) Based on an Asian Development Bank report, nearly one in four Asians today is poor, surviving on less than \$1 per day. (see C.P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh, "Poverty in Asia" Sept. 11, 2001, http://www.macroskan.com/the/worldeco/sep01/wec110901Poverty_Asia_1.htm). Clare Short, Britain's International Development Secretary, opined that 65% of the world's poor live in Asia. ("Britain announces commitment to alleviating poverty in Asia" Feb. 1, 2000, <http://www.netlondon.com/news/2000-5/FE21E1D8B69AAB8F802.html>). See also United Nations Economic and Social Council: General (E/ESCAP/SAPPC/1) 15 Oct. 2002 html version where it is categorically stated that "development cannot be considered to have taken place

unless the incidence of poverty has been reduced.” And poverty, it was pointed out, had numerous ramifications which required that the targets which should be addressed included “ increasing access to schooling, lowering maternal and child mortality, halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, and improving the lives of slum dwellers.”

- ¹¹ http://www.longelyplanet.com/destinations/south_east_asia/ho_chi_minh/
- ¹² “Towards a New Asia Strategy. Commission of the European Communities. Communicating from the Commission to the Council. COM(94) 314 final, Brussels, 13.07.94” (<http://www.delidn.cec.eu.int/docagr-com94-314.htm>)
- ¹³ See Gaurav Datt and Martin Ravellion, ‘Is India’s Economic Growth Leaving the Poor Behind?’ in *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol.16, No.3, 2002.
- ¹⁴ “Poverty in India” <http://leader.linkexchange.com/46/X1089042/showframe?>
- ¹⁵ Jessica Weaver, “Professor seeks more understanding of Southeast Asian culture” (*The Minnesota Daily* mndaily.com Sept. 30, 2003).
- ¹⁶ See Asian Studies Conference Japan <http://www.meijigakuin.ac.jp/~kpkusai/asjc01.htm>
- ¹⁷ See “India economic growth ‘likely to surge past 9 pc’ ” (<http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/Articles.asp?Article=71020&Sn=BUSI>)
- ¹⁸ Jessica Weaver, op. cit.
- ¹⁹ See letter by S.M. Mohamed Idris in the *New Straits Times*, 23 Feb. 2004, p.13.

