

ASIA COLLOQUIA PAPERS

Vol. 04 No. 01 // 2014

Asian Futures, Old and New

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In this keynote address to the York Centre for Asian Research's (YCAR) 2013 international graduate student conference, Tania Murray Li tackled a number of entrenched ideas about "Asia" as the shining future, which underpin the "new" discourses motivating and shaping many contemporary engagements with and analyses of the region. Her reflections on the implications for Asian studies of this "old" often orientalist discourse in the guise of the "new," contributed to the conference's theme, (Re) Constructions: Researching and Rethinking Asia. It also sparked the kind of critical, multidisciplinary discussion envisioned by the organizers, which aimed to rethink what it means to study Asia and Asian diaspora, especially by reconstructing existing conceptual frameworks.

Asia has moved place. Once coded for culture and antiquity and situated on the global periphery, it is now imagined as central to global capitalist futures with its “Asian values” conveniently recast in functionalist terms. The “old” Asian future envisaged that Asia would eventually catch up with Euro-American standards of modernity. A “new” triumphalist discourse imagines that Asia is now leading the way. But in this new discourse, two old narratives remain firmly in place. One is orientalist, in that it rests on thin knowledge and caricature; the other is anachronistic. Its foundation is the replication of unfolding transitions, from rural to urban, farm to factory, as if we know from experience the modern form that Asia will take. Critical scholars need to be aware of these traps and tropes, and carve out new lines of inquiry alert to the range of futures being made across Asia today. This lecture explores these themes with special attention to spatial and temporal unevenness, increasing inequality, and forms of abandonment which are too often legitimated in orientalist terms.

Old and New Asian Futures

In the new discourse on Asian futures we are invited to envisage a world in which the appearance of “the new” is increasingly located not in Europe or in North America, but in Asia. For icons of urban modernity we look to Shanghai and Mumbai instead of Manhattan or London. For new forms of transnational capitalism, we look to Bangalore and Hong Kong rather than to Detroit. For emerging forms of democratic politics we look to Indonesia, Nepal and India rather than to the United States; and for the latest advances in digital living we look to Japan and Korea rather than to Canada or Sweden. With the emergence of “the new Asia/Asia as the new” it might seem that we have overcome the orientalist understandings of Asia as a place that is underdeveloped, mired in tradition, and insulated from the outside world. But not so fast.

Critical scholarship on orientalism focused primarily on the discourses that were dominant at the level of nation-

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states, many of which had genealogies that could be traced back to colonial times. Thus, we learned how “India” and “Java” came to be constituted as objects of a colonial gaze, and how this gaze helped to constitute what it meant to be born as an “Indian” or a “Javanese” person in the late-twentieth century. These critical studies paid less attention to sub-national and intra-Asian orientalism, which have remained substantially intact.

In the nineteenth century when “world history” coded Asia as ancient and lost in its past and located it spatially as a periphery, Asian elites often sought to constitute themselves as modern by defining regional or domestic “others” as backward. In so doing, they appropriated and reworked the logic that mapped hierarchies of space (centres, peripheries) onto temporal sequences (modernity, backwardness). In the early twentieth century, for instance, China was imagined as Japan’s “Orient” by Japanese empire-builders, and Southeast Asia later took on that role as well. In China, minorities were imagined as backward by the ruling Han majority, who regarded themselves as the vanguard of progress. Peasants—half of China’s population—were seen as uncivilized. Similarly, in Indonesia under the late colonial regime, the densely populated island of Java and, within it, the city of Jakarta, came to define the geographic centre of modernity, against which the “outer islands” were viewed as deficient.

I would like to suggest to you that these familiar national and regional hierarchies continue to define visions of Asian futures. They line places up along a neat and predictable hierarchy from the most to least modern. They naturalize difference and they orientalize it: they treat it as a matter of culture, character and development stage. They are also anachronistic—out of step with the times. Like the colonial version, the old/new/resurgent orientalism is contradictory: it culturalizes “the other,” but it also proposes an evolutionary trajectory in which modern futures will eventually be enjoyed by all (Li 2007, 14-4). This concept of evolution—also known as modernization or transition—assumes that the trajectory experienced by Euro-America in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries will be repeated globally in similar form. Sooner or later, backward people and places will enter the

transition path. They too will move from the country to the city, from agriculture to industry, from the past into the future. I want to challenge this vision, and the sense that we know the shape of Asia's future: more or less like "the West" albeit with Asian characteristics.

Unevenness

Half of Asia's population is still rural and these people gain their principal livelihoods from agriculture. This fact can be rather shocking to the rising urban middle class, who live in air conditioned bubbles, for whom the rural is another country: out of sight, out of mind. Aren't these rural people moving to the cities? Yes and no. Although the percentage of rural people is decreasing, in much of Asia, as in much of Africa, the net numbers continue to rise. A table for Southeast Asia will serve to illustrate.

Source: FAOSTAT data; reprinted from Hall, Hirsch and Li (2011, 3). FAO defines agricultural population as "all persons depending for their livelihood on agriculture, hunting, fishing and forestry. It comprises all persons economically active in agriculture as well as their non-working dependents."

Total population, agricultural population, and agriculture as % of GNP

	Total population (millions)		Agricultural population (millions)		Agricultural population as percent of total population		Agriculture, value added, as percent of GDP	
	1980	2005	1980	2005	1980	2005	1980	2005
Cambodia	6.8	13.9	5.1	9.4	76	68	47(1993)	33
Indonesia	146.6	219.2	78.6	89.1	54	41	24	13
Laos	3.2	5.9	2.6	4.5	80	76	60 (1990)	45
Malaysia	13.8	25.6	5.4	3.7	39	15	23	8
Philippines	48.1	85.5	24.7	31.1	51	36	25	14
Thailand	47.3	65.9	30.4	29.9	64	45	27	9
Vietnam	53.3	84.1	39.1	54.9	73	65	40 (1985)	21
Total	319.1	500.1	185.9	222.6	58	45	-	-

Note that across the region the contribution of agriculture to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) reduced in the period 1985-2005. This is significant politically because it means that what happens in agriculture is of less importance to the national economy and its planners. It isn't the core driver of

wealth or growth. Also, the percent of people deriving livelihoods from agriculture is reduced. But look at totals. Only in Malaysia and Thailand are fewer people living on the land. All the other countries are stuffed with more people trying to live from agriculture.

How well are they doing? Not so well. They are progressively losing access to land. It is becoming harder to survive on the land on the old terms. The promise of agrarian transition or “modernization,” is that people dislodged from the land can march off to the city and get a job. This is happening in China, Thailand and Malaysia, but in two of the Asian giants, India and Indonesia, spectacular GDP growth over the past decade has been virtually jobless (ILO 2007; see also ILO 2013). In Indonesia, manufacturing did not rebound after the Asian crisis of 1997, and Indonesia’s exports are outcompeted by China, Vietnam and others. Also, manufacturing remains spatially very uneven. In the province where I have been carrying out research, Central Sulawesi, only four percent of the population find work in manufacturing and mining combined; so most people continue to work in agriculture. If they lose their land, they really don’t have anywhere else to go, or anything else to do. How about migration? Around four million Indonesians work abroad, the men as plantation labour in Malaysia, the women as domestics in Saudi Arabia and Hong Kong, but migration hardly makes a dent on the employment problem (Hugo 2007). India’s remarkable growth over the past decade has focused on elite, English-speaking service sector positions, powered by the expansion of the financial system. These have produced a celebrated growing middle class. Nevertheless, this remains only a quarter of India’s population. A million or so work in call centers, but there are millions more university graduates standing on street corners, educated but unemployed, and with little or no prospect of finding decent paid work (Dasgupta and Singh 2005; Jeffrey 2010). In China, there has been massive growth in manufacturing, but the rate is slowing. The government is committed to a program of accelerated urbanization, but it doesn’t have jobs for half a billion Chinese peasants. This isn’t likely to change. Across Asia, vast numbers of people will have to continue living in the countryside, although the terms on which they can do this

are becoming increasingly precarious as land is put to new uses, and workers are displaced. Oil palm, for example, a crop rapidly blanketing Borneo, Sumatra and Papua, requires very few workers. It is a massive land gobbling, people-dispelling machine. It doesn't offer a future for the people who are in its way (Li 2011). They can't continue to live and farm on the old terms, but the future that was promised to them hasn't materialized, and it isn't on the horizon.

By pluralizing Asian futures, I want to highlight the range of futures emerging for differently situated Asians. As scholars we mustn't be taken in by simplified narratives and hype. We need to explore how the inequality and unevenness that I have just highlighted is experienced, and how it shapes peoples' imaginaries, practices and plans.

A striking feature of the new discourse on Asian futures is its conviction that the future will be capitalist and its subjects—Asians—market subjects first and foremost. The “Asian values” that have attracted interest from the region and beyond are the values assumed to be functional for capitalism. But is this the way Asians imagine their own future? Or do they have quite different priorities and concerns? What are the circuits of communication—through media, advertising, film, architecture, urban design, education, sports events, travel, unions, political parties, activist groups, religious or ethnic networks—that shape peoples' sense of their current and future place in the world?

A comparative and historical lens helps to sharpen our focus on what is distinctive about the present. For much of the twentieth century, socialist futures were prominent elements in discourses about Asia and in the imagination of many Asians, as the future to be sought, or the evil to be prevented. These experiences left strong and distinctive traces in the different nations of Asia: in China, a history of communism; in India, the continuing presence of a strong state despite liberalization, and the sometimes nominal, sometimes powerful influence of communist political agendas; in Indonesia, the palpable absence of the organized left in public life, following devastating massacres of half a million alleged communists in 1965 and the silencing of left and populist politics thereafter; in South Korea, the Kwangju massacre and uprising in 1980

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and so on. Strong nationalisms, sometimes fascistic, were also prominent elements in the constitution of subjects during the twentieth century, and their traces still remain.

Prominent today alongside capitalism, cosmopolitanism and consumerism, is a renewed emphasis on world religions—Christianity, Hinduism and Islam—each with its own circuits for communication and subject-making. There is also a renewed emphasis on sub-national ethno-territorial identities as erstwhile minorities, like the Uighurs in China, or Indonesia’s and Nepal’s “indigenous” people, revisit histories of internal colonialism and rediscover transnational flows of people and ideas that offer quite different perspectives on the past and visions for their futures.

From what I have observed, “expectations of modernity,” as James Ferguson calls them, have deeply penetrated the popular imagination so that most Asians, including rural people in the rather muddy, backward places where I usually work, aspire to be modern and to have access to “modern” consumer goods (Ferguson 1999). This is not the only current shaping their desires, but it is a prominent one. If possible, they would like their children to have urban jobs and clean work, preferably not in farming. Compared with other world regions such as Latin America, peasants are not prominent in national imaginaries. For the most part, they are still seen—and see themselves—as backward. Since the end of Cold War, governments have less interest in reforming them, developing them or molding them into national subjects. They are largely irrelevant to the version of the future defined by “Asia shining.”

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There is a middle class vision of Asian rural life—a desire for the sustainable, the organic, the wholesome, but it is often orientalist, with little relation to actual rural lives. There is also an official vision of Asian family and community that does some pernicious work: the orientalist argument that Asians don’t need state-based systems of social protection and distribution because “the Asian family,” or the “Asian village,” with its traditions of moral economy and shared poverty will take care of people (Li 2009, 2010). In China during the financial meltdown of 2008, twenty million migrant workers were sent “home” to villages—ex communes—that no longer had

the land or resources to support them. In Indonesia, social welfare provisions are very undeveloped. I recently attended a public lecture during which an Indonesian official argued that even if Indonesians are poor they are still happy in their villages and urban wards. He showed pictures of smiling children and noted that neighbours come out to help with weddings and funerals. For this official, "Asian values" served as a guarantee. I confirmed with him afterwards that he had never lived in a village, so his images were formed in large part through short visits and through myth and media. Perhaps he had watched one of the popular, sanitized, village-Indonesia soap operas featuring honest farmers and their handicrafts. This is a world in which happy villagers stay patiently in their place. The family-focused view also comes up in urban contexts. It resurfaced in South Korea during the Asian financial crisis, when the government took measures to provide for unemployed married men, especially homeless men, but not for women or young people, who were expected to be sheltered by their families (Song 2009).

If I am correct, and expectations of modernity are powerful and real, people may well mobilize to contest the orientalist order that consigns them to the family, the past and the rural peripheries. If so, the mobilization will likely be led by educated young people, often just one generation away from agriculture for whom opportunities for social mobility and inclusion in the economic and political life of the nation fall far short of their hopes. The protagonists of Tahrir square and the Red Shirts occupying Bangkok are recent examples. Prominent contemporary rural social movements in Asia are more often motivated by a demand for a share of national prosperity than by a desire for the preservation of rural life. But their idioms and their modes of organizing are not the ones we might expect. Unlike the peasants of the 1960s, they are not organized by communist parties, but by populist leaders that latch onto religious, ethnic or xenophobic elements, as the recent attacks on Muslims in Burma attest.

Agenda for Asian Studies

There are lots of instant experts on Asia today. Drawn in by

hype about the dawn of the Asian century, every university administrator has been to Mumbai, Jakarta and Beijing, drumming up business and seeing for themselves what the fuss is about. But what do they see? Their circuits are confined to major cities, to air conditioned offices and hotels, and the Asians they meet all speak impeccable English. This is a very limited and mediated Asia. To get to know another Asia, we need to invest in learning about histories, literatures and geographies that are diverse, often muddy and uncomfortable. We need to learn Asian languages. This is the investment that the students who organized and participated in this conference are making. I salute you for it.

I salute equally the “Asians” and non-Asians among you. Many Asians growing up in Asia’s modern cities in middle class families have never been to a village. They have more in common with urbanites in Toronto than they do with the people living in their own “back yard.” So it takes huge energy and commitment to invest in learning about your own country—its peripheries, its past, its people and its literary traditions. It may mean going against the wishes of family members who expect educated young people to be fully focused on “the future,” a prospect which seems so much more promising career-wise.

Area studies got a bad name in the Cold War as a vehicle for instrumental knowledge about how best to govern and carry out social engineering. We need to take it back as an arena for critical scholarship. Today, more than ever, we need to sustain traditions of critical scholarship that are grounded in empirical realities across a broad spectrum. We need to study processes, practices, meanings and ways of living in all their varieties, past and present, and in their full unevenness. All the disciplines have a part to play in this, including history, geography, literature, anthropology and political science. Personally, I am keen on disciplinary and place-specific knowledge because it takes time and investment to build up expertise. So it is appropriate, in my view, to start in one field, in one place, and do your homework, your reading, your language learning, and your fieldwork. But I advise you to keep open to knowledge being generated in other disciplines and in other parts of Asia because it will enrich your thinking and your work.

Area studies got a bad name in the Cold War as a vehicle for instrumental knowledge about how best to govern and carry out social engineering. We need to take it back as an arena for critical scholarship.

That has been my experience. I feel as if I have gradually become an “Asianist” as I’ve learned more from my students and colleagues, and through reading. But I started out with, and still undertake, very specific, focused, and mainly muddy field research in the particular places where I’ve invested years of my life.

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Dr. Li gave this talk at the York Centre for Asian Research international graduate student conference, (Re)Constructions: Researching and Rethinking Asia, on 26 April 2013 at Glendon College, York University in Toronto, Canada.

Please cite this paper as:

Li, Tania Murray (2014). "Asian Futures, Old and New". *Asia Colloquia Papers* 4(1). Toronto: York Centre for Asian Research. Available at: <http://ycar.apps01.yorku.ca/publications/asia-colloquia-papers/>

ISBN: 978-1-55014-638-7

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