

Imagining Asian Studies

The Future of Asian Studies

Forum >
General

Predictions are rarely on the mark because we do not know the future. The best we can do is extrapolate from the past which is forever swallowing the future via the passing moments of the present. But sometimes we can take a direct peep, as when I was listening to INTEL chairman Andrew Grove who was asked by Charlie Rose: 'How long will our American pre-eminence in power and technology last?' Andrew protested that he was not a prophet and then declared: 'Ten years.' Charlie asked for reasons. Andrew began by quoting Paul Kennedy's book on the rise and fall of countries and civilizations: 'We are not different, we are now at our peak, our youngsters are no longer hungry or ambitious and almost all our graduate students in the basic sciences on which technology depends are Asians. Most of them will be teaching and working in India and China.'

By Frits Staal

Andy's prediction is relevant to the future of Asian Studies because power and technology depend on basic scientific knowledge, not only of mathematics and physics but of languages, civilizations, and values. Asians have long believed that studying such topics is part of Euro-American culture, which they supposed to be superior to Asian traditions in these respects. But history shows that most of these disciplines originated and flourished in Asia long before they reached Europe, not to mention the Americas. Is the ascent of Asia perhaps a simple return from what was a temporary detour?

At Berkeley, I have seen it coming: a steady increase in the number of Asian students. Almost all of them return home if only because American regulations make it impossible or unbearable for them to stay. In Europe, students in the basic disciplines have also become rare and there are few Asians to take their place. The Dutch Academy of Sciences has reported that mathematics is declining in the Netherlands even faster than elsewhere. While Asians are progressing, Euro-Americans are slowing down, which is tantamount to sliding back. It is inevitable that technologies, economies, and all that depends on them will follow.

Reversals and asymmetries

It has not always been like this. During the Renaissance, Europeans were eager to learn 'Arabick' in order to update their meagre understanding of mathematics and astronomy. The trend has since reversed: Asians began to absorb Euro-American knowledge and Euro-Americans ignore Asia in spite of Asian Studies. Asian-Americans are equally uninformed about Asia. My postal clerk, who is Indian, believed that Tokyo was in China. And ignorance is compounded by inconsistencies: Why is 'Oriental' prohibited when 'Western' is not? It is the reason I use the ugly and erroneous neologism 'Euro-American' instead of 'Western'.

Bernard Lewis disorients his readers when he writes: 'until a comparatively

recent date, there were no Occidentalists in the Orient.' Lewis fails to mention that there were scholars writing in Arabic, such as al-Biruni, who were Orientalists *avant la lettre*. Lewis restricts his Orient to the Middle East, as did Said. But the greatest Occidentalists of Asia were Chinese, Japanese, Javanese, Khmer, Korean, Tibetan, and other Buddhist monks, who translated Sanskrit sources from the Indian subcontinent, which was situated to their west. In quality and quantity, these contributions are on a par with the translations from Greek and Latin, sometimes via Arabic, into the modern languages of Europe. The texts were similar insofar as they were not restricted to Buddhist matters but included astronomy, grammar, logic, medicine, and other scientific disciplines.

Clashes with modernities

Bernard Lewis' *What Went Wrong: The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* is strikingly relevant here. Modernity is a trendy concept, but the term modern is used in the customary manner: it refers to progress when the event has just occurred and is, therefore, a relative term. Prior to Islam, there was a clash between Christianity and modernity that thwarted scientific progress and is not quite over. Progress in astronomy, for example, stopped around 150 AD when the most advanced worldview in existence was that of Ptolemy. The Chinese continued to work, however and, a millennium later, were vastly ahead of Europeans.

Some setbacks – such as the Swedish resistance to the use of Indian numerals – are of short duration. Others are a more serious threat. In the nineties, the Hindutva government of India ordered 'Vedic mathematics' to be taught in all schools. It affects hundreds of millions of children, not counting future generations for we do not know how long it will last once the tradition of teaching modern mathematics has been destroyed. All Indians who can afford it now send their children to private schools. It restricts progress once again to the wealthy who are the least hungry or ambitious.

'Vedic mathematics' is neither Vedic nor mathematics. It is not Vedic because Vedic mathematics consisted of geometry, in many respects similar to the ancient Greek variety. In Europe, it lasted until Newton; in India, it was replaced by trigonometry and algebra about a millennium earlier. It is not mathematics as explains T. Jayaraman, a theoretical high-energy physicist working at the Institute of Mathematical Sciences of Chennai, by telling the story of a book that was written by the Shankaracharya of Puri, the pontiff of a Brahman sect who died in 1960, and was posthumously published in 1965. His Holiness claimed that his book, called *Vedic Mathematics*, was based upon an appendix of the Atharvaveda that no one had seen or heard of. The text consists of simple or fast ways of dividing, multiplying, and factorizing numbers and other tricks that appeal to children. The claims made on its behalf are astounding. Government officials declare: 'whatever is very ancient in India, that precisely is most modern for the world.' Some say that the introduction of 'Vedic mathematics' into the curriculum is a deliberate effort to keep people ignorant. It may keep a political party in power after which India's progress will come to a full stop and make it dependent on foreign imports, as it was during the colonial period.

Not so Asian values

'Vedic mathematics' is one of the mythologies that are sometimes referred to as 'Asian values' by politicians who have other motives up their sleeves. Malaysia's former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, did much for his country in his younger years. He wrote together with Shintaro Ishihara, now governor of Tokyo, that Asians need not bow to Americans and that the future belongs to Asia – a thesis largely in tune with what I am presently writing. A few years ago, Mahathir declared homosexuality a decadent Western vice that contradicts 'Asian values.' It has enabled him to put his rival Anwar Ibrahim in jail on unsubstantiated charges, following anti-sodomy laws that were abolished long ago in Britain and only very recently in all the states of the USA. All Asian countries that have made homosexuality illegal either belonged to the British Commonwealth or instituted Islamic laws. In all these regions, homosexuality prospered in the past. Mahathir ignores these facts and does not seem to know that Chinese literati have referred to homosexuality as 'the cut sleeve' since the first



Cahill, J., Scholar Painters of Japan: the Nanga School, New York: Asia Society (1972), pp. 11 and 24.

Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, spirits soaring, but when he awoke he was Chuang Chou with all his wits about him. Is it Chuang Chou who dreams he is a butterfly, or a butterfly who dreams he is Chuang Chou? The Taoist 'Transformation of Things' inspired the millennial flourish of the life sciences in China. DNA lies at its root. Will the future take us further, as in *The Matrix* where Keanu Reeves as Neo wonders whether he is human or a computer creation?



Courtesy of <http://academic.reed.edu>

century BC, when a Han Emperor whose male lover was sleeping on his sleeve, cut it off in order not to wake him when he needed to get up himself. A Singapore lawyer, Philip Jeyaretnam, sums up the situation: during the last 150 years, Asia has abandoned, due to 'Western' influence (to which he might have added 'partly'), the burning of widows, foot binding, the caste system, slavery, and concubines; and adopted its most backward notions, hatred and fear of sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular.

Area studies

We need entomology, meteorology, semantics, and area studies; but we need more, and Obeyesekere explains how: 'Areal barriers can be broken only by comparative analysis and theoretical thinking.' The present difficulty is that most scientists use thematic and disciplinary distinctions that are based upon Euro-American categories. In India, *grama* may be the same as *village*, but *karma* and *jnana* are more adequate categories than *religion*, *philosophy*, or *ethics*. Areas, moreover, differ not only in character but also in size. Robert Cribb may be right that the idea of 'Southeast Asia' is running out of steam. The terms *South*, *Southeast*, and *East Asia* themselves have remained unintelligible to the world outside

The Parthenon in Athens stands for mathematical truth underlying the universe. Greek geometry is related to that of Vedic India and both were inspired by earlier Mesopotamian notions. A millennium later, Arab and other Asian algebras came streaming into Europe, and Galileo declared that mathematics was the language of the universe.

Asian Studies. They resulted from American post-Second World War politics, chiefly based upon a desire not to offend and thereby offending without discrimination. But we are scientists, diplomacy is not our business and reality should be our guide. Why not redress the balance and leave it to Asian scientists to evolve new terms and concepts?

Asian Studies can help answer the question that is now before us: what went wrong with the Euro-American

tradition? Will the answer pave the way for a more even-handed presentation and evaluation of Asia, or will there only be a shift in the contests between nations? And why single out Asia? We may answer these questions after all claims of superiority on behalf of this or that territory or system of values have been abandoned, and humanity is contemplated within the context of the non-human universe of which it is a minute spark – if that.

Students of Asia may assist in doing

The higher terraces of Borobudur on central Java are circular. The lower galleries depict the life of the Buddha. Other episodes are similarly found all over the Buddhist world. A typical Mahayana story depicts the son of a merchant in search of enlightenment, identified in Chinese sources.

Many of these legends remain popular in plays and theatrical performances in Myanmar and Thailand. They teach respect for human rights and non-violence towards all living beings, as exemplified by Emperor Ashoka and put in context by Romila Thapar. Amartya Sen draws attention to another Asian value that is universal: Reason.

something more practical as well. Perhaps it is they who should initiate it. I believe that Asian and non-Asian scientists and scholars should cooperate closely to create reliable introductions, curricula, and websites that explain the main facts about the universe, life, human language, and the world's civilizations, societies, and values. They should be translated into numerous languages and made freely available to every citizen of the planet. ◀

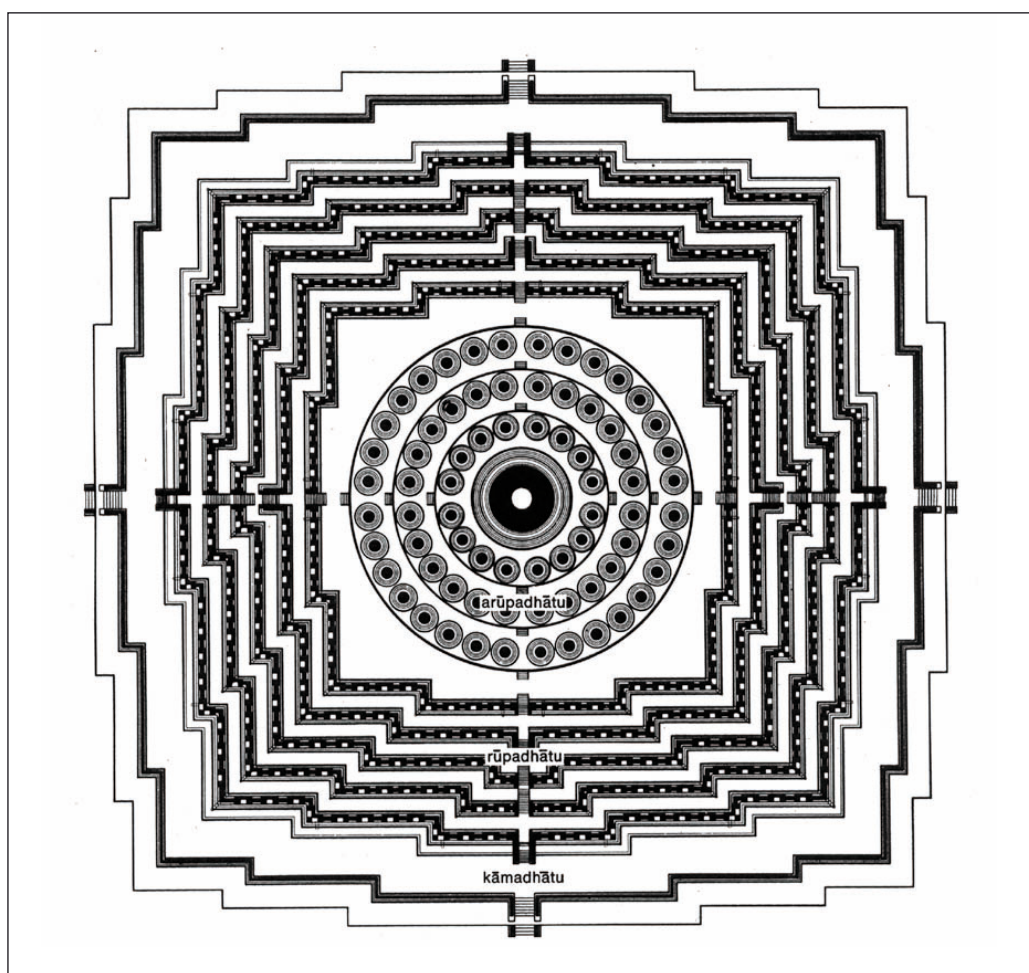
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Marzuki, Yazir and Toeti Heraty, Borobudur, Jakarta: Djambatan (fourth edition, 1989), back cover.