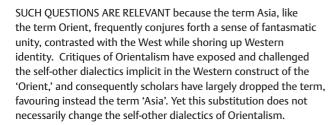# What is a Techno-region?

Asia can be, and has been, imagined as a region in terms of geography, geopolitical configurations, language, culture, society, economy, or some combination of these. In disciplinary terms, there are many different 'Asias' that do not necessarily coincide. Is the notion of 'cyberAsia' intended to construct a different imaginary of Asia, or offer a critique or a new critical angle on received ways of thinking about things Asian? Or, is the neologism cyberAsia supposed to reflect some new condition that has arisen in Asia?

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SUCH QUESTIONS ARE RELEVANT because the term Asia, like the term Orient, frequently conjures forth a sense of fantasmatic unity, contrasted with the West while shoring up Western identity. Critiques of Orientalism have exposed and challenged the self-other dialectics implicit in the Western construct of the 'Orient,' and consequently scholars have largely dropped the term, favouring instead the term 'Asia'. Yet this substitution does not necessarily change the self-other dialectics of Orientalism.

In the early 1990s, David Morley and Kevin Robins used the term 'techno-orientalism' to illustrate how images of the technologisation and technological superiority of Japan served as a focal point for American panic over the economic success of Japan and the potential threat to American hegemony. In keeping Edward Said's reminder that Orientalism is not simply a matter of negative stereotypes but also of positive stereotypes that posit a putative unity in the interest of stabilising an object of knowledge, Ueno Toshiya used techno-orientalism to describe the reception of Japanese anime and pop culture outside Japan, especially in the United States. Such critiques force a blunt question: how does cyberAsia differ from techno-Orientalism? Does the term cyber, with its aura of technological novelty and futurity, posit the imaginary unity of Asia in order to impart the illusion of neutrality and objectivity to collecting and accumulating of knowledge of cultures, technologies, commodities and peoples?

'Other Asias'

Gayatri Spivak's recent evocation of 'other Asias' might provide a good point of departure for thinking about the implications of the term cyberAsia. While she explicitly challenges the imposition of a fantasmatic unity called Asia abundantly evident in Orientalism and pan-Asianism, she speaks of a pluralised Asia in which difference would no longer be articulated between, say, the West and Asia but within Asia itself. Rather than surrender the idea of Asia, she seeks a pragmatic localised deconstruction of this disclinary construct which, like Said's Orient, is after all not an airy fantasy easily blown away. Spivak's account invites us to ask how the concept cyberAsia might deal with internal difference, with other Asias. Here it is not simply a matter of speaking in the plural, of cyberAsias. Pluralising the term only makes a difference if that multiplicity presents a critical and analytical challenge to some set of received orientations or dispositions, be they perpetuated in the academy, the media, the cultural industry, or some other discourse, institution or habitus.

Given that the cyberAsia project foregrounds cultural production associated with Japan (*manga, anime,* video games), questions arise about the relation between Japan and Asia in particular. Two received sets of dispositions become particularly important in that context. First, there is the geopolitical imaginary in which East Asia, and specifically Northeast Asia (China, Japan, Korea), comes to stand in for Asia in general. To some extent, this might be thought to be postwar North America's Orient or Asia, in contrast to Western Europe's Orient (the Middle East), which present different condensa-

tions or formations of Western modernity. How can looking at Asia from the angle of cyber present a challenge to this imaginary and address the internal difference of Asia, of the West and of modernity? Second, in the context of Japan, there is the history of pan-Asianist thought that posits the fantasmatic unity of Asia only to hierarchise relations between Japan and its colonies. This is a bad way of conceptualising the internal difference of Asia, which serves as another reminder that plurality is not merely a matter of adding an 's' onto words. Nor is internal difference a matter of juxtaposing nations or cultures. If the cyberAsia project wishes to challenge rather than reinforce the fantasmatic unity of Asia, then it must think about how the term cyber might spur or hinder our imagination of other Asias. It must directly address how thinking 'cyber' can have an impact on the imagination and articulation of difference within 'Asia'. In other words, critical attention should fall on the implications of the rather elusive term cyber.

Technologies of control

The prefix cyber- has become common, even overly used, in referring to almost anything related to computing or electronics, and as the Wikipedia entry notes, there is a great deal of overlap with the prefix e-. Nonetheless, the two have very different connotations. Partly due to the literal meaning of cyber- as control (as in cybernetics) and partly due to its association with highly technologised dystopian worlds (as with cyberpunk and cyborgs), cyber- implies a distinctive technological condition, linked to new information and communication technologies. And the prevalence of dystopian valences denotes some manner of critical response to this technological condition, a 'cyberised' or cybernetic world that suggests extensive technologies of control in which telecommunications are associated with telecommand, in which cyber-entities grapple with or struggle against their cyber-condition. Yet, as Félix Guattari points out, this manner of thinking technology can be very structural and mechanistic – and thus highly deterministic. There is a post-Romantic fascination with technological determinism and its discontents, which results in a struggle to break the grip of technologies of control.

Such a manner of thinking technology strives to locate moments of indeterminacy within the mechanism, moments and sites where life emerges (so-called artificial life) from the inorganic, or where thought emerges from brute matter or mechanism (so-called artificial intelligence). In effect, the term cyber frequently entails a search for internal difference, a quest for indeterminacy under conditions in which new technologies imply structural determinism. Of course, there is always the danger that this way of thinking information and communications technologies, because of its presuppositions of determinism, serves to mystify rather than enlighten. This is precisely why caution is needed. Because the discovery of emergent life or intelligence is commonly taken as the harbinger of a new era or new world, care is required

in thinking about the conditions for and status of new. In addition to the simple question of whether this is truly new, the question arises about whether this newness repeats ideologies of an overcoming of the modern or postmodern technological condition, thus completing, fulfilling and entrenching that condition rather than critiquing it.

This is especially important when the term cyber becomes a prefix for Asia. If cyber is to sustain its theoretical and critical force, it must be posed as a question of technology, not a fact of technologisation or (post)modernisation, or as a fact of novelty. Just as Spivak's pluralisation of Asia demands an internal differentiation of received ideas about Asia, so the idea of cyberAsia must open and sustain specific questions about technology and techno-cultures associated with the term cyber, and at the same time, address how technologies serve to integrate or differentiate the fantasmatic unity of Asia, whether it is posited and sedimented linguistically, culturally, socially, economically or geopolitically. In other words, the cyberAsia project must give precedence to the question begged by its neologism: 'what is a techno-region?' A number of questions follow from this one. If we take cyber as an index for a particular mode of technological or techno-cultural integration/differentiation, we might, for instance, think about how this mode of techno-integration/differentiation interacts with the deterritorialising and reterritorialising forces of capitalism (perhaps in the context of the emergence of newly integrated economic zones in East Asia). Questions also arise about how this techno-integration/differentiation affects the articulations of national culture and social identity. In light of theories that see a graphic integration/differentiation in East Asia based on legacies of writing and drawing associated with Chinese characters, the question of the relation between techno-integration/differentiation and histories of writing is equally urgent.

To pose the question of cyberAsia in this manner means giving up on the idea that novelty – specifically, the novelty of attaching the prefix cyber to Asia – is a guarantee of difference or otherness and thus of critical engagement. Rather it is imperative to acknowledge that 'cyberising' Asia does not necessarily amount to pluralising Asia and articulating other Asias. This also means giving up on the fascination with new objects and the collusion with the logic of markets that currently mars the study of popular culture and especially Japanese popular culture, for instance. Rather than fuss over the next big thing, the goal would be to pose questions about the relation between technologies, knowledge production, cultural production, circulation, distribution and regionalisation, in the interest of questioning rather than grounding the technological condition, and in the interest of pluralising rather than unifying Asia.

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