

CyberAsia

In the popular imagination of many in the so-called West, Asia enjoys a romantic and intimate relationship with high technology. Visionary representations of the future, such as those elaborated in films like *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) or novels like *Neuromancer* (William Gibson, 1984), often lend the global future an Asian flavour, either as a sign of the world's possible cosmopolitan destiny or more simply as an indication of the way that digital technology and East Asia appear to be closely interwoven. This associative weave is particularly strong in the cyberpunk world of virtual reality, artificial intelligence, networked communications, and explorations of cyberspace as the new final frontier. CyberAsia weds Asia to the politics of futurities in complicated and diverse ways.

Chris Goto-Jones



Allegations, imaginations and analyses

This special issue of *The Newsletter* offers a variety of lenses on the question of cyberAsia. This expansive neologism contains: allegations of Asia's technological superiority; imaginations of Asia's utopian relationship with digital technology; and finally analyses of the concrete ways in which high technologies have transformed social and cultural practices in the region (and permitted the region to ripple around the world). Hence, the term cyberAsia is a confounded one, generating myriad possible meanings and implications, both empirically and theoretically.

In his contribution to this edition of *The Newsletter*, Tom Lamarre offers some thoughts on the various ways in which cyberAsia might function in discourses of today's politics of knowledge.

The political relationship between technologised visions of Asia and a more classical sense of Orientalist mystique is noted with increasing frequency in the literature of Asian Studies. Scholars such as Ueno Toshio and (more recently) Wendy Hui Kyong Chun have argued that this re-representation of Asia as a technological icon amounts to a kind of 'techno-Orientalism.' Indeed, in some ways, it seems that the domain of cyberspace itself might function as a space of Orientalism within the so-called West: it is a virtual (and largely textual) man-made geography created as an often fantastical 'other' place, or heterotopia. In this sense, the association of Asia with cyberspace begins to look like another strategy of epistemic distancing and domination. It is along these lines that my own provocation in this issue of *The Newsletter* seeks to argue that Asian Studies might share a frontier with the enterprise of Science Fiction. At stake here is the status of 'Western' knowledge of (cyber)Asia.

Transforming modernity

Of course, even if we were willing to accept that a kind of Orientalism is at work within the concept of cyberAsia, it is not the case that the connection between Asia and digital technology



has been invented *only* by observers in Europe or the US. In this issue, for instance, Fabian Schäfer draws on the well-known work of Japanese critic Azuma Hiroki to explore the ways in which internet-use within the increasingly inclusive *otaku* (geek) subculture functions to transform modern subjectivity.

Elsewhere, Azuma himself has argued that this *otaku* subculture is effectively the vanguard of a new, postmodern society that has abandoned its modernist attachments to coherence and narrative logic in favour of a kind of 'database' model of engagement with the world. Cyberspace is a key technology in this process of overcoming modernity, but Azuma also ties it to other allied media forms, such as *anime* and *manga*. For Azuma, the landmark moment in the 'animalisation' of postmodern Japan was the broadcast of Anno Hideaki's epic anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Gainax, 1995-6). Other commentators have pointed to classic anime such as Oshii Mamoru's breakthrough, *Ghost in the Shell* (Production IG, 1995) as signalling a kind of self-Orientalism in the *anime* industry, fuelling a global perception of an intimate connection between Japan and the technological future. In his contribution to this issue, however, Cobus van Staden takes a different approach to the relationship between Japan and *anime*, focusing instead on the ways in which *anime* representations of Europe have helped the medium (and hence Japan) to reach global audiences. Van Staden suggests that a deep-seated Europhilia in Japan serves to exoticise *anime* for the Japanese themselves whilst providing one of the conditions for the possibility of Japan's cultural globalisation at the same time.

Like Van Staden, Jeroen de Kloet is interested in the ways in which the media associated with cyberAsia are actually used by the people themselves (in the present). Focusing on the practice of hackers and bloggers, De Kloet discusses the ways in which these cyberactivities have (or have failed to) transform the public sphere in China. Drawing on a wealth of empirical evidence about actual internet usage in China (including Taiwan and Hong Kong), Jens Damm provides an insight into the extent to which this vital player in the future of Asia is saturated by cyberspace, mapping some of the ways in which the virtual realm of the PRC spreads a net around the world.

An unknown but projected future

As the case of China shows clearly, the whole project of cyberAsia is overshadowed by the political menace of the unknown but projected future; the emphasis on technology constantly raises questions about power and wealth disparities within societies, highlighting the unevenness of access to cyberspace and other digital technologies as well as the possible development of these disparities in the future. However, as Bart Barendregt shows in his essay, the issue of technological development also functions as a problematic between nations or regions. With particular attention to the newly developing Muslim majority nations in Southeast Asia, Malaysia and Indonesia, Barendregt explores the creative collision of religion with technological advancement, elaborating the ways in which these particular instantiations of cyberAsia provide models of aspiration for the future of the Islamic world that differ from the predominant visions of the so-called West as well as those of some radical Islamic groups. In the words of Richard Barbrook, Barendregt considers some of the ways in which the present serves as a 'beta version of a science fiction dream,' and he demonstrates the importance of understanding the dimensions and diversity of these dreams in Asia and elsewhere.

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