

# IIAS Report

## The 'Framing Asian Studies' conference, and its framing

Albert Tzeng

HOW IS OUR KNOWLEDGE about Asia framed by the geopolitical contexts in which it is found - and how is it produced and disseminated? Which roles do the various knowledge institutions (e.g., foundations, associations, institutes, publishers and archives) play in promoting and directing Asian Studies? And what sorts of power relations can be identified, and critically reflected upon? IIAS, in partnership with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore, organized the conference, *Framing Asian Studies: Geopolitics, Institutions and Networks*, to address these questions (18-20 November 2013).

The first day of the conference explored the contested discourse on Asia from the perspective of West and East, and various alternative geographical framings in studying the region. The second day started with reflections on the colonial framing of knowledge on Asia, and then focused on case studies involving various institutions. The last day assembled papers that trace how a particular Asian region (e.g., India, China, Japan, Korea or the Southeast) has been understood by scholarship carried out in another area, in light of the changing bilateral connections.

### Conceiving the conference theme

As the recipient of the 2013/2014 IIAS-ISEAS Fellowship, I was given the opportunity to assist in organizing a conference. I proposed a theme derived from my dissertation, *Framing Sociology in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore: Geopolitics, States and Practitioners* (monograph forthcoming, Ashgate). The dissertation basically traces how sociology as a Western discipline was introduced, institutionalized and developed in the three Asian postcolonial societies listed in the title. It seeks to theorize about the observed patterns and to relate them to regional geopolitical factors (e.g., the Chinese Civil War, Cold War and decolonization) and the distinctive contexts of the three countries. Anchored within the broad tradition of 'sociology of knowledge', the study started with a review of numerous approaches to theorizing about the social sciences in Asia - Orientalism, Eurocentrism, Postcolonialism, Captive Mind, intellectual imperialism academic dependency theory and some others. These approaches, however, were found to be limited by their built-in dualistic image of East-West dichotomy and the inability to deal with the more sophisticated patterns of multi-site knowledge flow.

To theoretically better accommodate this inquiry, I borrowed the ideas of world system (Wallerstein), network society (Castell), knowledge network (Altbach), and cultural capital (Bourdieu) to propose a *world system of knowledge network* as an overarching conceptual frame for narrating the historical expansion of knowledge enterprise from the medieval European universities to a vast global network of knowledge production and dissemination. The conference, like my dissertation, would thus inquire about the social framing of Asian Studies at large, thereby situating the production and dissemination of knowledge about Asia within a 'world system of know-ledge network'. I paid special attention to the regional and geopolitical aspects, to a wide array of institutions that include both the state-centric and the transnational, and at the practitioner level, I focussed more on the actors' networks rather than on the individuals.

### Patterns of submissions

The call for paper attracted 140 abstract submissions. Noticeably, the most abstracts were received from Asia, more specifically: India (26), Indonesia (9), and Japan (9). In Europe, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom dominated, each with 9 submissions. The geographical pattern reflects multiple factors that include the size of each country, maturity of academic activities, research agendas and the span of the IIAS-ISEAS scholarly network. But it might not be a coincidence that the three Asian countries with the greatest presence were all at one time linked to the Dutch colonial Empire, and the two European countries with the most submissions happened to be the two major colonial powers that shaped the historical landscape of modern Asia.

Thematically the submissions covered a wide range of topics, but there were a few obvious gaps. First, there were no papers dealing with 'knowledge about Russia or West Asia'. The few submissions by researchers from this area all focussed on how they studied China, Korea, India or Southeast Asia. Second, we received no proposals wanting to discuss any major Western research institutes that are influential in the field, while we did

see some attention paid to their Asian counterparts. Finally, most papers dealt with geopolitical factors, with the role of some institutions discussed, but with very little attention diverted to networks of either institutions or individuals - probably due to the relative abstractness of the category and the technical difficulty in its empirical investigation.

### Abstract review and selection

'Quality' was of course an essential aspect of consideration used to make the selection, but I identified at least five others, which I like to describe as part of an 'editorial imagination'; they had more to do with the overall presentation of the conference and its anticipated proceedings.

First, we considered the *potential for dialogue with other papers*. We looked for papers with similar or comparable themes that could be grouped into sessions. Second, we preferred studies about a *geographical unit of greater significance* for an international audience. Papers about hotly discussed countries like India or China had an edge compared to a paper on, for instance, a particular ethnic group on a less-known small Pacific island. Of course, the latter surely had a chance if its theoretical significance could be convincingly argued, but it had a higher threshold to cross.

Third, when in doubt, *the author's institutional affiliation and publication record* was also considered. The selection committee's confidence in the author (e.g., could s/he deliver what s/he had promised?) was based on the biographical information. This biographical information, moreover, would namely also shape the degree of confidence of prospective readers. Fourth, authors with different career patterns tend to develop variant *writing styles*; considering communicability and the desired consistency in presentation, we tended to favour abstracts without extreme styles. Finally, we also kept an eye on the *geographical balance* of presenters and topics, but eventually found we didn't need to make any major adjustments as the shortlist was already geographically diverse.

### Normative ends

The above discussion brought light to what had been *preferred* and *excluded* in an international venue like this conference, and certainly has the potential of triggering criticism at the normative level. I hold that these decisions are defensible given the purpose of this conference. An event at this scale has no obligation to take care of the diverse knowledge demands in the world, and any expansion to inclusiveness will only be possible with compromise in its analytical focus and prospect for dialogue. However, it is not my intention to ascribe a prestige to the type of scholarship we looked for.

On the contrary, the involvement in this process only deepened my conviction that there exist too many justifiable forms of knowledge that may not fit in an international venue like this conference. I can clearly see the value of many of the rejected papers to a local audience, and how they deserve a place in their own right. Their failure to be included reflects not their inferior quality, but the constraint of this conference. Hence I cannot agree with the tendency to prioritise anything 'international' over the 'local', as manifested in the 'internationalisation' or 'globalisation' discourses embraced in many Asian countries. Those myths only serve to marginalize these local demands, to narrow the scope of intellectual possibilities, and to force scholars to betray their local scholarly or public audiences.

This is where this short note meets the concern behind the conference theme. The reflection of the 'framing' of this international conference highlights the indispensability of the local platforms. Similarly, the discussion about how our intellectual enterprise is being framed by geopolitical and institutional factors is aimed to refresh the imagination of our profession, and to invite deliberation on how we as scholars should think and what we should do to bring our practices closer to our ideals. The conference and this note both started with questions that are empirical, but they both have a normative end.

**Dr Albert Tzeng is the 2013/2014 IIAS-ISEAS Fellow (p.w.tzeng@gmail.com)**

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# Framing Asian Studies

Geopolitics  
Institutions  
Networks

BplusC  
Chapel Hall  
Oude Vest 45  
(entrance via  
Hazewindsteeg)  
Leiden

Convenor:  
Dr Albert Tzeng,  
IIAS-ISEAS Postdoc Fellow  
For information  
and registration visit:  
[www.iias.nl/framing](http://www.iias.nl/framing)

ISEAS Institute of Southeast  
Asian Studies, Singapore

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