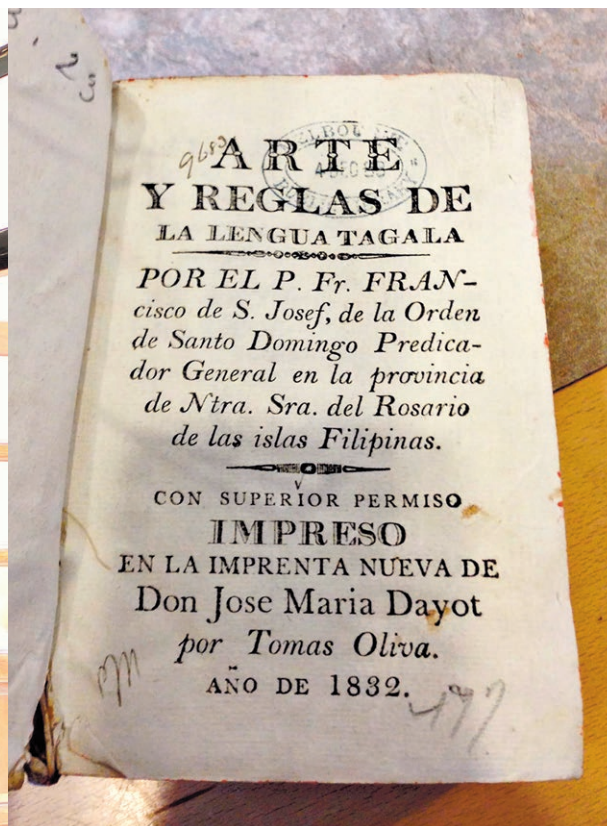


The newness of Asia and its discontents



Far left: Cloister of the San Agustín Church in the walled Spanish city of Intramuros, in Manila. Originally founded in 1571, it is the oldest stone church in the Philippines and has been declared in 1993 as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Left: This is the title page of a copy of the 3rd edition of the *Arte y reglas de la lengua tagala* (1832), which has never been included in the bibliographies of missionary linguistics before, and which I have discovered at the State Library of Victoria in Melbourne. Originally published in 1610 by the Dominican grammarian Francisco Blancas de San José, the work was arguably the most authoritative missionary grammar of the Tagalog language. My PhD project explores the notion of translationality and historicity in missionary exo-grammatization, and *Arte* is my main text of study.

The polysemy in the phrase ‘The New Asia Scholar’ is particularly useful in evaluating the state of scholarship about Asia. On the one hand, it can refer to a scholar who is attuned to the newness of Asia as a field of inquiry. On the other hand, ‘The New Asia Scholar’ can be interpreted as a reconfiguration of ‘who’ studies Asia.

Marlon James Sales

The incidental Asianist

Despite all that has been written about the continent, the collective advances in the humanities, in the social sciences and even in science and technology have pushed the boundaries of our research, and have expanded our consciousness of Asia as a historical, social, political, cultural and mediated space. This interpretation likewise acknowledges the crucial role of the continent in the dynamics of an ever-changing world, where the issues of international security, regional cooperation, migration and territoriality, participatory citizenship, and the like, have continuously challenged what may be previously thought of as the foundational axioms of Asian Studies, and the essentialist portrayals of Asia as a locus.

ICAS 9 (Adelaide, July 2015) was a testament to this. Apart from the more familiar discussions about the major players in the region and the usual emphasis on politics and economics, there were many panels that explored novel themes that linked Asia to a wider array of research directions, towards which many of us are heading. It was particularly encouraging for me to see panels on the engagements of Asia with Europe, Latin America, and Africa; on minority cultures and their practices; on the itinerancy of Asian bodies and texts; or on disaster preparedness and risk reduction in the face of climate change. At its most altruistic, the role of the scholar is to bring these issues to light, and to seek answers to questions that the newness of Asia forces us to ask.

However, ‘newness’ can also be interpreted as an attribute not of the field of inquiry, but rather of the person who chooses to look at Asia through a different set of lenses. The long-established approaches in studying the area now co-exist with alternative approaches that are either sourced from autochthonous scholarship, or borrowed from disciplines not traditionally linked to Asian Studies. This, to my mind, best describes my own case as an ‘incidental’ Asianist, given that my primary research interest is Philippine Hispanism. In other words, I am able to draw near to the Philippines and to Asia through the tools of Hispanic Studies and Translation Studies, and often rely on this interstitiality to make sense of my experience as a Filipino and as an Asian.

Linguistic concerns

My approach is not without its challenges. Language, for instance, is pivotal in my research. Aside from the already complex relationship between Philippine languages and English, I am compelled to add Spanish to the equation, and thus submit myself to the issues of accessibility, legitimacy and perspectivism. What texts in Spanish can I include in my examination of Asia? How legitimate are these texts in describing the continent? From which perspective do these

texts articulate their stand? And more importantly, where do I find myself in relation to these texts? The ‘foreignness’ of Spanish also locates me at a different authorial position, and I feel that this is the same crisis faced by any Asia scholar who writes outside the perceived spatial, chronological, identitarian, epistemic or discursive boundaries of the region. Am I an outsider looking in? Or am I an insider who catches a glimpse of Asia from an outlying point in the peripheries? By extension, how does the work of a European or Australian Asianist compare to that of his peers who are from the continent? Or should these questions even matter at all?

That these linguistic concerns are a subject of a continuing debate among Asia scholars indicates that there is so much to be gained from beyond the frontiers of English-language research. The peculiarity of Asia as a site of study is such that in order to participate in the discourse, one has to resort to using a language other than his or her own, a practice that can ultimately preclude many marginal voices from the discussion. For many Asia scholars, academic visibility entails that they be read and heard in English with all its concomitant discomforts and discontents. It is for this very reason that the announcement that Chinese and Japanese will likely be given their due space in the next edition of the ICAS Book Prize is a positive development. I hope that this is just the first of many steps towards a more eclectic appreciation of the discipline. I also hope that more Asian languages will soon find their niche as analytic tools that require no further explication (if I may be allowed to use this term from Translation Studies), but without falling into the trap of self-exoticization.

The intercultural towards the transcultural

Another issue that comes to mind is that of interculturality, which was at the heart of ICAS 9. I find the call for an intercultural understanding of Asia to be so promising, and yet so surprisingly limiting. The acknowledgment that different cultures exist in the continent is a necessary pre-condition for interculturality to thrive, and I share the general consensus that this is needed now more than ever. As was pointed out in the inaugural panel of InterculturAdelaide, in an age when absolutisms are gaining a lot of ground and are even taken as normative in certain contexts, a commitment to interculturality becomes an imperative.

Interculturality, however, seems to be restricted to a culture’s awareness of and respect for its others while remaining intrinsically detached from whatever is happening outside its perceived boundaries. But these boundaries are porous, and what may be perceived as a parochial concern can actually demand a response that transcends borders. A Filipina worker who suddenly finds herself on the Indonesian

death row together with two Australians, a Brazilian and four Nigerians illustrates the tangency of migratory flows and the differences in the laws that govern them. The devastation of a super typhoon that almost wipes out the provinces along the Philippine eastern seaboard can potentially become the same devastation that affects many parts of East and Southeast Asia. The turmoil in the contested territories in the West Philippine Sea situates many countries in the region in a condition that tests the delicate balance of international diplomacy.

In examples such as these, our model for the study of Asia must move from the intercultural towards the transcultural. Far from the respectful detachment of interculturality, as it were, Asian Studies should be envisioned as a venue of exchange that leads us to abandon the comfortable impermeability of our borderlines.

Creating Asia

Our individual experience of Asia, though discrete, must be taken as an interconnected sum that affects all of us, and reaches many other people at the fringes of academia. In order for us to sustain the relevance of Asian Studies, we must recognize how we change and are changed by Asia. The new Asia scholar knows that s/he translates Asia for the world, and it is through our work that Asia is understood, examined and instantiated. This association to Asia conversely translates us, and our academic activism should be informed by our positionality in between disciplines and sites, and by our readiness to transgress them if there be need.

The newness of Asia and its discontents pose many questions that have yet to be resolved. I take comfort in the fact that the in-betweenness of the new Asia scholar and the translated-ness with which s/he explores the region can serve to do away with the reductive models of Asian Studies, and interrogate the many Asias that we continue to create for ourselves.

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Below: Calle Crisólogo is the most famous street in the City of Vigan, Province of Ilocos Sur (Northern Luzon). Considered as the *mestizo* district during the Spanish colonial rule of the islands, the street has retained its cobblestone path and heritage houses of Filipino-Chinese families from the period. The UNESCO has declared Vigan as the best preserved example of a Spanish colonial enclave in Asia.

