

THE 'NEW ASIA' AND ACADEMIA: THE ART OF CRAFTING SHARED REGIONAL SPACES*

Rima Sondaité van Soest

International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden and Amsterdam

This paper presents and evaluates strategies employed by Southeast Asian academics and think tanks in 'regionalizing knowledge'. Sections one and two of the paper provide an overview of recent 'Asian' historical imaginings, arguing that the search for the "roots of ASEAN" in the distant past is politically motivated. The final two sections focus on an intellectual project involving some of the most prominent scholars of East and South Asia. Those involved in Inter-Asia, also known as the Movements project, are scholar-activists with a well-articulated political agenda. In analyzing the inter-Asian agenda, I question its implications: "decolonizing mindset" and "becoming Asian" are fraught with ambiguity.

Introduction

In order to achieve the East-Asian community we will have to seek a new way to exchange, share, distribute, and utilize science, technology, economic opportunity, and political power.

Sunu Jongho, Toward the Universal Contribution by East Asian Universities

The contemporary call for indigenization in East Asia is a call to overcome irrelevance and to reverse academic dependency. The call is to decolonize the much Westernized social science discourse in the region and subsequently to practice relevant social science. The call for indigenization is a call for creativity and originality. More than anything else, the call involves the collective quest for an East Asian academic identity.

Su Hoon Lee, The Rise of East Asia and East Asian Social Science's Quest for Self-Identity

Academic involvement in national and regional identity construction is common, perhaps inevitable, and generally welcomed by governments that fund policy-formulating projects. In today's world of regions, it is common practice for individual scholars, think tanks, strategic

* The author would like to thank Takeo David Hymans, freelance editor, for his work on this article.
<hymans5@hotmail.com>

institutes, regionally oriented journals, academic exchange programs and associations to participate in the collective quest for identity.

This paper is about scholars of and in Asia, and academic practices that promote a sense of identity in the 'New Asia'. I use the term 'New Asia' – initially the catchphrase of Singapore advertising agencies – to refer to the discourse on specifically *Asian* cultural qualities and practices: the 'Asian way', 'East Asian consciousness', 'Asian renaissance', 'Asianization of Asia', 'Asian values'. The rise of the discourse in the 1990s had everything to do with rapid economic development and living in postcolonial assertion. Hood Salleh writes in *The New Asia and Its Critics*:

[W]hen 'Asian' nations react to 'the West's' image of Asia, they are usually referring to the ingrained and lingering fondness in the West for the 'Old Asia'.... [I]t is as the New Asia that they prefer to be known. The New Asia embodies a changed and dynamic image of Asia, and the perception in the New Asia is that any deviation from this image is dated, obsolete even, and prevents a proper and dynamic interpretation of new, changed circumstances.¹

If the colonial past denies Asia its originality – and at the same time its *Asianness* – then it is up to Asian academics to study anew the region and its past. This is the starting point for Asian (academic) indigenization.

The rhetoric of East Asia's² academic regionalism is located in subjectively defined space. The 'New Asia' discourse is generally silent on criteria that may constitute (a part of) Asia as a region: 'cultural homogeneity' or geographical "objectivities" such as natural boundaries. Björn Hettne and Frederik Söderbaum describe this process as a geographical area's transformation "from a passive object to an active subject capable of articulating the interests of the emerging region."³ 'Asia' becomes what Gavan McCormack calls "a fantastic ideological construct without racial and cultural meaning"⁴ connoting subjective experience of spatial affiliation. Cultural homogeneity can, in the end, be endorsed through the discourse, as a particular community is imagined as a "community of faith." Academic imaginations can be a powerful tool in this process.

¹ Hood Salleh, "The New Asia and Its Critics", *Asia Quarterly*, 1998, <http://www2.vuw.ac.nz/asianstudies/publications/quarterly/98octoberb.html>

² I mean by East Asia Northeast Asia (Japan, Korea, China, Mongolia) and Southeast Asia (Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Brunei Darussalam, Myanmar).

³ Björn Hettne and Frederik Söderbaum, "Theorizing the Rise of Regionness", Paper presented at the CSGR 3rd Annual Conference "After the Global Crises: What Next for Regionalism?" in the University of Warwick, Scarman House, September 16–18, 1999: 9.

⁴ Peter J. Quoted in Katzenstein, "Regionalism and Asia", Paper presented at the CSGR 3rd Annual Conference titled "After the Global Crises: What Next for Regionalism?", University of Warwick, Scarman House, September 16–18, 1999: 6.

Below I examine activities of not only indigenous Asian scholars but also some Western academics that have been based in East Asia for decades. Holding professorships in the region, some have contributed to the discourse as authoritative and powerful outsiders. “If regions are imagined constructs, then no one does a better job of offering legitimacy to the act of imagining than the historian who can claim familiarity with an era long gone by.”⁵

The Roots of ASEAN

Kenneth R. Hall’s recent article in the *Asian Journal of Social Science* describes pre-colonial Southeast Asia’s regional interactions. In the Strait of Malaka region “there was a sense of regional self-confidence and progress among societies who had enjoyed over two hundred years of widespread socio-economic success.”⁶ The implication is that ASEAN is but a contemporary re-incarnation of regionalism.

As an academic writing on Southeast Asia, Hall belongs among those who “are more sensitive to indigenous language sources. They search for a people’s sense of themselves, their identity, as rooted in and shaped by their perceptions of the past.”⁷ By taking this stance, Hall distances himself from most twentieth century interpretations of Southeast Asia. Like many authors of the last decade, and as a world-systems researcher, Hall criticizes Euro-American “colonial social science” for reducing Southeast Asian facts to their relations to Sinic and Indic cultures.⁸

Hall aims, then, to present his material from a Southeast Asian viewpoint. He employs in his argument historical records of the ‘glorious’ Majapahit kingdom of the fourteenth century and surrounding countries where he ‘finds’ a sense of regionness. There was a sense of commonality, his argument continues, among the “south seas” travelers: royal inter-marriages were frequent and rulers of the surrounding islands traced their ties to Majapahit.

Hall’s ‘findings’ are similar to those of Anthony Reid, a historian who argues for Southeast Asia’s distinctiveness. Among his writings, the regional history *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680*⁹ may be the best known. There Reid argues that trade and colonization established enduring structures within Southeast Asia, constituting the region’s distinctiveness:

[A]s the Indian Ocean became a Muslim lake in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, “lands below the winds” (*tanah dibawah angin*, in Malay) became the way Southeast Asia

⁵ Amitav Acharya, *Southeast Asia: Imagining the Region*, 2003, http://www.himalmag.com/2003/january/asia_special_4.html

⁶ Kenneth R. Hall, The Roots of ASEAN: Regional Identities in the Strait of Melaka Region Circa 1500 C. E., *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 2001, 29 (1): 87–119, p. 87.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88–89.

⁹ See Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680*, Volume One: The Lands Below the Winds and (1993) Volume Two: Expansion and Crisis. Yale: Yale University Press, 1988.

was distinguished (from India, the Middle East, and later Europe) in the ports of the region itself, and for Malay, Arab and Persian speakers more widely. This way of conceptualizing Southeast Asia was common among maritime peoples from Aceh to Manila and as far north as Siam and Cambodia.¹⁰

Thus Reid and Hall search for regional consciousness in “indigenous” sources. ‘Correctly’ interpreting pre-colonial Southeast Asia leads them to ‘discover’ trans-border cooperation and a sense of shared heritage in Southeast Asia centuries before ASEAN. Their arguments are constructed to project ASEAN’s present to the Majapahit past, and document the continuity of region-ness from the fourteenth century to the present. Events such as the Pacific War and nationalism in Southeast Asia “interrupted and inhibited the natural tendency for neighbours to learn from each other.”¹¹

In a similar vein, Amitav Acharya in *The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia* argues that the region’s cultural commonalities are reflected in the concepts used by Western scholars to describe pre-colonial Southeast Asia. O.W. Wolters’s *mandala*, Tambiah’s *galactic polity* and C. Geertz’s *theatre state* point to ‘indigenous’ or ‘regional’ models of the state and inter-state relations that have little in common with territorially bounded Marxian and Weberian states.¹² *Mandala*, for instance, was used by Wolters to describe the system he found in the kingdoms of Srivijaya, Angkor, Ayudhya, and Majapahit, comprising concentric circles of lands under control of the king. These center-periphery relations as found in Southeast Asia were different from the model of, for instance, Northeast Asia, where boundaries were clearly articulated.¹³

Similarly, the *galactic polities* system as described by Tambiah was a “center-oriented arrangement” in which domains and satellite regions “continually changed their affiliation according to the fortunes of war and diplomacy.”¹⁴ Geertz’s image of the *theatre state* refers to a system with overlapping territorial domains and weak internal political and administrative control.¹⁵ Acharya argues that these three notions defining the nature of the state and inter-state relations in Southeast Asia can be interpreted as representing a distinct *regional pattern* contributing to greater intra-regional homogeneity. Common cultural values and political consensus created by and through interacting *mandalas* formed a basis for *regional identity*.¹⁶

Acharya, however, is not uncritical of these concepts invented by Western scholarship. He even acknowledges that these concepts are simplistically Orientalist: the image of the

¹⁰ Anthony Reid, *Networks of Knowledge in Eastern Asia – Interrupted Histories*, <http://hku.hk/cas/cap/programmes/card5/Papers/Anthony%20Reid/Anthony%20Reid%20%20Networks%20of%20knowledge.htm>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Amitav Acharya, *The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 20–21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22–23.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22–23.

mandala as a “non-coercive cultural form of authority” portrays “an exotic, idealist, Orientalist construction of the Southeast Asian past.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, Acharya sees these concepts as forerunners

to attempts in more recent times by Southeast Asian leaders to speak of an ‘ASEAN Way’ of international conduct, which emphasizes consensus-building and conflict-avoidance. And just as the *mandala*, the galactic polity and the theatre state could be the basis of an imagined Southeast Asian community during the classical period, the ‘ASEAN Way’ has been at the core of efforts to build a Southeast Asian regional identity in the modern era.¹⁸

Studies of pre-colonial Southeast Asia’s regional past are thus deeply political: they confirm ASEAN’s legacy and significance to the world. They also prove the “naturalness” of Southeast Asia, countering the popular interpretation that the region was christened in World War II by the American Southeast Asian Command. Southeast Asia, then, is not and never has been the product of colonialism or outside forces, but is, on the contrary, found as early as the fourteenth century. The discovery of early conceptualizations of the region and the scrupulous collection of facts representing regional interactions shift the importance of the early kingdoms from national to *regional* histories, empowering in this way today’s ASEAN.

One Southeast Asia

The intellectual project ‘One Southeast Asia’ is best understood within the context of promoting ASEAN expansion. ASEAN’s five founding members (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) welcomed Brunei in 1984 and Vietnam in 1995; the admission of Burma and Laos in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999 completed the ‘One Southeast Asia’. A post-Cold War opportunity to end decades of ideological confrontation and extend ‘peace and prosperity’ across the region, ASEAN expansion was celebrated in the rhetoric of finally (re)establishing Southeast Asian unity.

The challenge of admitting new members invited academic involvement. The joint efforts of think tanks and institutes resulted in the organization of several conferences, tens of papers, a volume of edited conference presentations, and the formation of the group *Citizens of Southeast Asia*, which counted among its members many prominent scholars. The latter group, convening in Manila in partnership with the Philippine government, produced two documents: *Southeast Asia Beyond the Year 2000: A Statement of Vision* in 1994, and *Towards a Southeast Asian Community: A Human Agenda* in 1996,¹⁹ both underlining the need to bring ‘One Southeast Asia’ “nearer to reality.”²⁰

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁹ Both statements are available online on Malaysia’s Institut Kajian Dasar (Institute for Policy Research) website, http://ikdasar.tripod.com/sa_2000/sea/sea/sa_2000.htm

²⁰ *Towards A Southeast Asian Community: A Human Agenda*.

The Institute for Policy Research (Kuala Lumpur), one of the major actors of the 'One Southeast Asia' enterprise, produced in 1996 the report *Dictate of Partnership: Cambodia, Laos and ASEAN in One Southeast Asia*. The Institute announced among its goals the rediscovering and recovering of "our histories, cultural and religious heritage."²¹

Jakarta's Center for Strategic and International Studies, organized in 1996 an international seminar titled *One Southeast Asia in A New Regional and International Setting*. A book published the following year inherited the seminar's heading; 'One Southeast Asia' hereafter became a new rhetorical device for ASEAN next to its "unity in diversity."

The strategies of locating Southeast Asia in time and space is evident in almost every essay in *One Southeast Asia in A New Regional and International Setting*. A uniform mental map of the times "far back in history" when Asia "had trade routes that brought diverse peoples into contact with each other"²² reappear time and again, as powerful contrasts to the period after World War II when the emphasis was "upon separate economic systems, with a strong element of protectionism"²³ and when "conflicts and confrontation among Southeast Asians has been exacerbated by the interplay of foreign interests in the region."²⁴ Achieving 'One Southeast Asia', then, emerges as an idealized and historically grounded vision serving very practical purposes:

A more interrelated One Southeast Asia presents new opportunities for us in the region to fashion our relations with the major external powers and shape our own future. For we recognize that a primary cause of regional insecurity and instability has been major power rivalry and intervention dating back to the colonial era... A One Southeast Asia that is not only politically coordinated, but economically coordinated will be in a better position to bargain in an increasingly competitive international economic environment.²⁵

The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Project

Inter-Asia Cultural Studies has emerged as a part of a movement for the ongoing construction and reconstruction of critical Inter-Asia subjectivities. It gives a long overdue voice to the intellectual communities in the region and recognizes its own existence as an attempt to continue critical lines of practices. The journal's aim is to shift existing sites of identification and to multiply alternative frames of reference: it is committed to publish work not only out

²¹ Address of Dato Kamarudin Jaffar during the International Conference on Muhammad Iqbal and the Asian Renaissance, held on June 3-5, 1997 in the Institute for Policy Research, Kuala Lumpur.

²² Robert A. Scalapino, "Asia – The Past 50 Years and the Next 50 Years", *One Southeast Asia in A New Regional and International Order*, 1997, 3–13, p. 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 6–7.

²⁴ Hasjim Djalal, "One Southeast Asia in World Affairs", *One Southeast Asia in A New Regional and International Order*, ed. Hadi Soesastro, Jakarta: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1997, 154–158, p. 155.

²⁵ Kwa Chong Guan, "One Southeast Asia's Relations with the Major Powers", *One Southeast Asia in A New Regional and International Order*, 1997, 171–175, p. 172–173.

of 'Asia' but also other coordinates such as the 'third world'. Its political agenda is to move across: state/national/sub-regional divisions, scholarship and activism, modalities/forms of knowledge, and rigid identity politics of any form.²⁶

--- *Editorial Statement, Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*

*Inter-Asia*²⁷ deserves attention as a project uniting scholars: Shamsul A.B., Chua Beng Huat, Chen Kuan-Hsing, Leo Ching, Partha Chatterjee, and many others. *Inter-Asia* or the *Movements* project counts among its main activities journal publishing²⁸ and conference organization: the first *Inter-Asia* conference was held in Taipei ("Problematizing Asia", 1998) and the second in Fukuoka ("Transitional Era, Transformative Work", 2000).

As a post-colonial critical inquiry, *Inter-Asia* seeks to avoid speaking 'for Asia' – its political agenda is formulated in ways not to exclude Asian pluralities. Attempts towards inclusiveness are demonstrated in the journal's readiness to translate articles from Asian languages: "We are obliged to do justice to all 'Asian' languages."²⁹ Pledged to avoid "rigid identity politics," *Inter-Asia*'s Asia is spatially unbounded: the Asia/Pacific, South Asia and Australia all find a ready home. To further avoid anything reminiscent of the "colonial structure" of area studies,³⁰ Indian and Australian scholars are often among the published authors.

What makes *Inter-Asia* different from other journals based in Asia, focused on Asia, and its sister cultural studies journal *positions: east asia cultures critique*, is its openly articulated political agenda. Besides the "decolonization project" to "deconstruct Cold War mental structures" and increase "South-South" interaction, *Inter-Asia* aims to critically assess the concepts "Asia", "Third World", and "modernity." The critical assessment of 'Asia' is of particular importance: the journal's aim to resist the dominating modes of theorizing and rhetoric of the 'Asian miracle' creates discursive space for critique and self-reflection.

Unwilling to reduce 'Asia' to pure 'nativism', the *Movements* project asks how colonialism-nationalism-nativism shaped 'Asia'. Sun Ge's article "How Does Asia Mean" concentrated on the historical "question of Asia." It was followed by responses from Rustom Bharucha and Satish Deshpande reflecting on the meaning of asking the "Asia question," *why* it was asked, by *whom* and *what* others in *Inter-Asia* had to say about it.

Deshpande in her response to Sun Ge argues for the need to intensify "inter-Asian intellectual traffic." 'Asia sentiment' among theorists arises from "being, or more accurately,

²⁶ "Editorial Statement", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 1 (1), 2000, 5–6, p. 5.

²⁷ Inter-Asia cultural project has a website at www.inter-asia.org

²⁸ Inter-Asia Cultural studies is published by Routledge 3 times a year, starting from April/2000.

²⁹ Chen, Kuan-Hsing and Chua Beng Huat, "An Introduction", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2000, 1(1): 9–12, p. 12.

³⁰ Harry Harootunian and Naoki Sakai, "Dialogue: Japan Studies and Cultural Studies", in *Positions: East Asia cultures critique*, 1999, 7 (2): 593–647, p. 596.

of *wishing to become*, an 'Asian'."³¹ Just as Indian and Japanese academics in the past invoked 'Asia' from very different contexts – thus inventing the 'Asia' of their choice³² – Deshpande wants to clarify “how 'Asia' has come to mean whatever it has in *my own context*.”³³ The common 'wish' to 'become Asian' in the many corners of geographical and cultural/intellectual Asia necessitates continued reflection on “where we might be placed, what we might sound like to others, and what we may reasonably expect from them.”³⁴

Given that inter-Asian interactions have to be established against the heavy odds of prior indifference and ignorance, can we not try to maximize the leverage offered by those areas of our intellectual formation where we do have something in common? In short, can we take advantage of the fact that we have all read many of the same texts, especially in the field of theory, even if these texts have originated in the West?³⁵

Recovering the “internalized West” (Ashis Nandy) within 'Asia' is the responsibility of 'activist scholars' when contextualizing 'Asia' in the present and historicizing its different careers.³⁶ This re-positioning makes it clear that any involvement with 'Asia' is only a *type of involvement* that can and should be located.

Rustom Bharucha in his response to Sun Ge rhetorically asks: “Under the omnipresent sign of 'Asia', what is not available for academic consumption?” There is nothing innocent about 'Asia', he argues, or its cultural heritage celebrated as 'reborn' in conferences such as the *Rebirth of the Traditional Arts* held in Taipei in 2000³⁷. “Manufacturing Asia” in countless 'traditional arts' workshops will not contribute to (evenly) embracing Asia's diversity. Only open, responsible inter-Asian dialogue can be antidotes to the monologues of early 20th century Pan-Asianism and inter-Asian spectacles of “traditional arts” fairs and conferences. For Bharucha, the framing, marketing and selling of “Asian traditions” by East Asian professionals represent new imbalances of power across Asia.³⁸

Bharucha also confronts 'Asia's' localization in East Asia. He wonders why 'Asia' remains a “non-issue” in public debates on cultural identity in contemporary India – in stark contrast to the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore's well-known engagement with 'Asia' in his intercultural dialogue with the Japanese art historian Okakura Tenshin at the turn of the

³¹ Deshpande Satish, “Making 'Asia' Mean: Towards a Response to Sun Ge”, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2001, 2 (1): 145–150, p. 145 (emphasis in original).

³² Rajadhyaksha Ashish, “The Dilemmas of Theory: the Trajectories Project”, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2000, 1 (1): 203–206, p. 205.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 146 (emphasis added).

³⁴ Deshpande Satish, “Making 'Asia' Mean: Towards a Response to Sun Ge”, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2001, 2 (1): 145–150, p. 148–149.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

³⁷ See Bharucha Rustom, “Under the Sign of 'Asia': Rethinking 'Creative Unity' Beyond the 'Rebirth of Traditional Arts'”, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2001, 2 (1): 151–156.

³⁸ Bharucha Rustom, “Under the Sign of 'Asia': Rethinking 'Creative Unity' Beyond the 'Rebirth of Traditional Arts'”, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2001, 2 (1): 151–156, p. 155.

century.³⁹ Okakura's most famous pan-Asian mantra "Asia is one" was written in Calcutta. Why then, the author asks, does "Asia's pre-eminence ... deepen as one proceeds eastwards, from Malaysia to Singapore to Hong Kong to Japan?"⁴⁰ If this is the case, 'Asia' is not one, as Okakura thought, but many, and some, depending on how they are positioned in reference to East Asia, are branded "more" Asian than others. Bharucha's question is directed to those responsible for this branding:

[W]e need to question very stringently the framing of Inter-Asia cultural production within the inequities of global capital in Asia itself. To what extent is the framing of these spectacles [traditional arts festivals] dependent on particular policies of funding, which have their own agendas and territorial biases?⁴¹

If Sun Ge's article was meant to historicize 'Asia', both Indian authors tend to 'rescue' 'Asia' from history and 'tradition.' They place it at the center of a continuum of contexts, assessing controversies of earlier pan-Asianisms and their re-appearance in contemporary debates as a means of ranking locales in Asia according to their levels of 'Asianness.'

Asia as method: the ambiguities of de-colonization

Among the critical aims of *Inter-Asia* is the search for reference points for Asian Studies researchers. Nostalgia for an indigenous perspective and fatigue with the 'West' are expressed in the *Introduction* to the first volume:

Comparisons have always been made, where the 'West' has been the frame of reference. Now, it is perhaps the time to multiply and to construct alternative frames of reference, and the 'third world', very much like 'Asia', is a promising possibility for this reframing.⁴²

One wonders what reference frames linked to 'Asia' and the 'Third World' imply. How can an essentialized category such as 'Asia' escape hegemonic claims? A. Chun and A.B. Shamsul write in the *Inter-Asia* volume dedicated to Asian academia:

In spite of its anti-colonial intentions, indigenization has tended to contribute more to the closure of multiple narratives and identities than their emancipation. The turn toward native studies of Orientalism and social science ironically has a dangerous ring to it.⁴³

According to the authors, the tendency to 'indigenize' social science in Asia is closely affiliated with state-directed nationalism, where Asian scholars are situated within "local institutional frameworks of power."⁴⁴ In other words, the promotion of 'native' visions has

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁴² Chen Huan-Hsing and Chua Beng Huat, "An Introduction", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2000, 1 (1): 9–12, p. 11.

⁴³ Allen Chun and A. B. Shamsul, "Other "Routes": the Critical Challenge for Asian Academia", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2001, 2 (2), <http://www.inter-asia.org/journal/issues/vol2/no2/newpage3.htm>

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

little to do with the process *Inter-Asia* is engaged in – “decolonization of mindset” – but rather strengthens nationalist positions. Chun and Shamsul call nationalizing ‘indigenization’ a ‘conservative force’, opposing it to the “post-nationalist consciousness” movements of the 1990’s, to which *Inter-Asia* belongs. The post-nationalist perspective of *Inter-Asia* is challenged, however, by articles whose most frequent points of reference are *national*. The editors, as if apologizing for this ‘shortcoming’, simply state: “On the surface, each article seems to focus on particular national questions. The issues raised, however, resonate with concerns elsewhere in the region.”⁴⁵

It is clear that inter-Asian or ‘regional visions’ in the scholarly work are few, even among cultural studies specialists boasting post-colonial, post-national perspectives. New modes of writing – termed “critical cosmopolitanism”, “new modes of collectivity” and “self-writing” by Chun and Shamsul – face Inter-Asian communicative gaps (Sun Ge). Trapped in the *lack* of these perspectives, the authors acknowledge: “Knowledge has never been so politicized. Academia has never been less free.”⁴⁶

Critical of the trend towards ‘indigenization’, the *Inter-Asia* community nevertheless proposes an epistemologized approach toward ‘Asia’. With their counterparts in the U.S., *Inter-Asia*’s activists organized a roundtable at the 2003 Association for Asia Studies (AAS) Annual Meeting (March 27–30, New York City) entitled *Asia as Method: Dialogues in Culture and Place*. It aimed to “discuss an emerging epistemological awareness that ‘Asia’ is not merely an object of study, but a ‘method’.”⁴⁷

According to the session’s organizers, “Asian studies has never been simply the study of ‘Asia’ as geographical and historical places” but has “always actively implied a ‘comparative’ study of the ‘self’.”⁴⁸ Sharing experiences of living in Asia’s post-colonialities will contribute to the rejuvenation of research agendas and unite intellectual concerns, securing “powerful” inter-Asian reference points and producing (new) cultural languages.⁴⁹ *Asia as method* is but one more strategy by *Inter-Asia* activists to “decolonize mindset” and overcome Eurocentrism.

All in all, *Inter-Asia* or *Movements* is an ambiguous project: while ‘problematizing Asia’ – a critical part of which is ‘dis-essentializing’ it – *Inter-Asia* scholars construct imaginaries that could be labeled *pluralistic Asiacentrism*, the multiplicity of inter-Asian and inter-Third World perspectives. Within this cultural, intellectual and indeed geographical space they believe to speak, read, and write *their* cultures in their *own* voices. Their attempts to deconstruct themes and scenarios – such as the ‘rise of Asia’ – construct new imaginaries for ‘Asian’ and ‘activist’ scholars. More often than not, *Inter-Asia* cultural criticism is aware of

⁴⁵ Chen Huan-Hsing and Chua Beng Huat, An Introduction, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2000, 1 (1): 9–12, p. 10.

⁴⁶ Allen Chun and A. B. Shamsul, “Other “Routes”: the Critical Challenge for Asian Academia”, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2001, 2 (2), <http://www.inter-asia.org/journal/issues/vol2/no2/newpage3.htm>

⁴⁷ See <http://www.aasianst.org/absts/2003abst/Interarea/sessions.htm#124>

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

itself being trapped in the imaginary of what Rob Wilson calls “*another* transnational and transcultural Asia/Pacific, not some ocean-submerged continent bespeaking exploration and expansion for marines, politicians and tourists.”⁵⁰ As yet another imaginary, where does ‘decolonization’ begin, and when does it end?

Concluding remarks

This paper showcased some of the ways in which academics, across time and space, have thought of ‘Asianness.’ I attempted to show that the language of ‘Asianness’ has many tongues, and that the culture of ‘Asianness’ is, more often than not, a stage upon which academic elites perform their distinctive roles in “New Asia” spectacles. In this process, scholarly arguments have come to serve political agendas while academics have transformed scholarly engagement into political action.

What does the future hold for the New Asia discourse? A major shortcoming, to date, has been the self-referential nature of the debate. Comparison with other supranational identity building projects – pan-Africanism and the EU for example – may yield interesting insights, both theoretically and methodologically. It may yet encourage citizens, scholars, and political leaders to critically engage in the projects of their regional ‘others’, the better to understand their own agency within inter-twined, trans-regional futures.

„NAUJOJI AZIJA“ KAIP RYTŲ AZIJOS AKADEMINĖS VISUOMENĖS INTELEKTINIS PROJEKTAS

Rima Sondaitė van Soest

S a n t r a u k a

Šis straipsnis nagrinėja akademinės visuomenės projektus, tiesiogiai susijusius su Rytų Azijos regiono formavimu. Pirmosios dvi dalys pateikia regioninės istorijos tyrinėtojų darbų apžvalgą, ypatingą dėmesį kreipiant į jų pritaikymą šiuolaikinės regioninės tvarkos (*regional order*) stiprinimui. Toliau argumentuojama nagrinėjant politiškai motyvuotą *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* projektą, vienijantį vienus žymiausių Rytų Azijos intelektualų.

Įteikta 2003 m. lapkričio 23 d.

⁵⁰ Rob Wilson, *Articulation of the Asia/Pacific as Transnational and Transcultural Space*, <http://www.inter-asia.org/journal/issues/vol2/no3/newpage29.htm> (emphasis added).