



Introduction to the Special Issue: Asian Transformations and Futures*

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I. Asian Transformations

During Zheng He's fifth voyage (1417-1419), his fleet managed to reach ports such as Hormuz, Aden, Mogadishu, and Malindi. This was 80 years before Vasco da Gama's first voyage to India (1497-1499).

1566: When Suleiman the Magnificent passed away, the Ottoman Empire was vast, ranging from Algiers to Buda (pest) to Aden.

Under the reign of Akbar (1556-1605), the Moghul empire expanded massively and by 1605—twelve years before the British set up their first trading post at Surat—it stretched from contemporary Afghanistan to Bangladesh. Akbar also promoted religious, linguistic and literary diversity.

1661: First major victory of the Chinese against a Western naval power: Zheng Chenggong (also known as Koxinga) defeated the Dutch East India Company and the Dutch had to give up Formosa (now Taiwan).

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From West Asia to East Asia and throughout many centuries, Asian societies have been huge catalysts of globalization. Explorers, and spiritual practitioners, and Asian leaders have been instrumental in linking Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America (Disney, 2009: 305-314; Bohorquez, 2020). Nederveen Pieterse (2018: 6) identifies three phases of Asian transformation: oriental globalization between 500 CE until 1800, the rise of the rest in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries during which Asian societies were somewhat more inward looking, and a second phase of Oriental globalization associated with the rise/return of China and rise of emerging Asian economies since the late twentieth century. Asia is back.

Building on the work of Hobson and others, Nederveen Pieterse also points out that European progress cannot be isolated from Asian innovations that occurred centuries earlier: “According to Hobson, in China’s ‘first industrial miracle’ ‘many of the characteristics that we associate with the 18th century British industrial revolution had emerged by 1100’ with major advances in iron and steel production, agriculture, shipping, and military capabilities... Several historians note that ‘none of the major players in the world economy at any point before 1800 was European’ (Nederveen Pieterse 2018: 28, citing Hobson, 2004). To give an indication of the sheer sizes: At the end of the seventeenth century both the Great Qing’s Empire and the Mughal Empire’s total economic output was equivalent to approximately 5 billion USD; the Ottoman Empire 1.3 billion USD and France 0.6 billion USD (Ranking Charts, 2019, nominal dollars). Controlled for purchasing power parity the size of the Ottoman Empire’s economy was slightly larger than that of the Spanish Empire; see also Cox (2015).

While we can often read about the rise of China and India or the dynamism of Asia’s newly emerging economies, or the so-called Global Shift towards Asia, it is perhaps more appropriate to write about the return of Asia. Could it be that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were not

the norm, but outliers in global transformation? By 2050, China, India, Indonesia are projected to be the world's largest, second largest and fourth largest economies, with the USA ranked third (PWC, 2017, GDP at purchasing power parity).

Nevertheless, while many indicators suggest a strong continuation of the return of Asia, a range of questions remain valid and timely: How do historical and intellectual legacies inform Asia's transformation and future? How are literature and fine arts shaping transformation? How do climate change impacts obstruct progress? How does ageing affect Asia's societies? By 2050, will it still be meaningful to view Asia as made up of various geographical blocks such as West Asia, East Asia, and Siberia? How can Asian societies prevent socioeconomic inequalities? Will China overtake the USA as the preeminent innovator? Are we entering a multipolar world or geopolitical bipolarity based on the China-USA rivalry? And what about continuing tensions within Asia (Auslin, 2017)? Transformation and future trajectories from the international to the local level do not unfold without significant uncertainties and unforeseen events. For instance, Andrade (2011) showed that weather events such as storms heavily derailed the strategic objectives of both the Chinese and the Dutch in the battle for Formosa during the mid-seventeenth century. And in mid-2021 the global supply of computer chips was disrupted due to the worst drought in Taiwan since 1965 (Nikkei Asia, 2021). For all the progress in innovative capabilities, Mother Nature still needs to be reckoned with.

Thus, at present in the twenty-first century, we are confronting uncertainty and transformation in every aspect of our lives for which we are ill prepared. Economies, business, politics, culture, education, social and everyday life are being challenged while pointing us towards emerging and unknown futures. Leading this transformation is Asia with its resilience and dynamism, and ability to respond in a way that respects the past, sees

the opportunities of the present, while having long-term visions. This is shifting the focus of global attention away from Europe and America. This special issue examines the role of Asia, its past and present and vision of possible futures, in creating the twenty-first century. It is based on a seminar series on Asian Futures, initiated by the Seoul National University Asia Center (SNUAC) which was held between September 2020 and June 2021. Taken together, this special issue will be of interest to scholars and students working on Asia's traditions and their role in the transformations of this century. It consists of two parts: a first part on Asian spatial futures (this issue) and a second part on intellectual legacies in Western Asia (April 2022).

II. Asian Spatial Futures

How will Asia's spatial patterns and trends change in the coming decades? How will the interactions of people and firms with our living space evolve? And what will be the implications for policy, in terms of fostering innovation, balancing rural and urban development, and creating liveable cities?

By 2050 South Asia is forecasted to host some of the largest metropolises in the world: Mumbai 42 million people, Delhi 36, Dhaka 35, and Kolkata 33 million. These urban spaces will be more crowded than Tokyo (33 million people; Hoomweg and Pope, 2014). It is also noteworthy that urbanization is a fast-paced process in smaller countries. Bhutan is currently the country with the highest urbanization rate in South Asia (World Bank, 2015). Meanwhile, some East Asian secondary cities such as Nagasaki and Busan are already experiencing population decline and population growth in rural areas have begun to stabilize, even decline in various Asian countries.

The United Nations expects the global rural population to peak before 2030 and start a process of gradual decline from 3.4 to 3.1 billion people by 2050 (UN, 2018).

Whereas these demographic trends can be predicted with a moderate probability, it is obviously much harder to predict how societal dynamics will change. Economies, political systems, and cultures will also change, but in which direction and with how many shocks? The 1973 oil crisis, the 1985 Plaza Accord, the 1997-8 Asian Financial crises, the 2007-8 Global Financial Crisis, and the Covid-19 pandemic have had profound and long-lasting impacts on Asian societies. For instance, the 1985 Plaza Accord triggered a massive inflow of Japanese investments to export processing zones in Southeast Asia and contributed significantly to the economic successes of countries like Malaysia and Thailand (Kimura and Ando, 2006). What has become clear is that gradual and linear change will be alternated by shocks and phases of chaos and mayhem. Climate change and an increasing risk of global pandemics such as the COVID-19 public health emergency are adding an additional layer of uncertainty to all parts of Asia. These uncertainties notwithstanding, it is possible, and in fact necessary, to contemplate how Asia's spatial dynamics might change. Ideally, each individual in Asia should be aware of scenarios, options, obstacles, and threats for the future, and plan to minimize her or his household's risk accordingly. In reality, however, most of us—in Asia as elsewhere—are scarcely able to comprehend the risks we face, much less plan for them strategically. In this first part of the special issue four articles investigate different themes, and yet they also share one commonality: all four touch upon core-periphery relations and possible futures for these relationships. Two articles focus on South Korea, and two on rural issues in other parts of Asia.

Douglas Gress et al.'s article is concerned with the present and future

of small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) innovation in Korea and Korea's innovation ecosystem. Facing diminishing exports and returns from technology, Korea has been championing SME innovation and marketization, but are policies working? Utilizing quantitative analyses, they deploy a multi-level approach to the study of Korean SME innovative behavior, an approach that includes analyses of individual, firm, network, and industry-level factors, to include the regulatory environment. Firms engaging in both new and incremental innovation are compared against those engaging in only incremental innovation. The multi-actor, multi-spatial analyses yield insights into policy efficacy and future trajectories for innovation in Korea.

Annie Pedret's article also deals with Korea, but from a different perspective. *City in a Village* approaches the problem of the degradation of Korean village life by addressing the questions: How can we further strengthen the current rural migration to rural villages in South Korea? Challenging solutions that propose solutions only at the physical and systemic level, she asks, what social ecologies and mental ecologies or perspectives are necessary to revive and create vibrant, viable, and sustainable life in a village? She argues that imagination, narrative and spatial fiction of this project are not only tools of intervention, but a valid form of knowledge for investigating subjects, like the future, that cannot be known.

Edo Andriessse et al. provide an overview of spatial-economic transformation and possible futures in rural Southeast Asia. An important question is to what extent the shift from agriculture and fisheries to manufacturing and services is not only contributing to urban economic growth, but also to rural poverty reduction. Empirically this contribution concentrates on Thailand and Vietnam, including findings of fieldwork in rural areas amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. What has become clear is that

despite processes of rural exit there are still hundreds of thousands of rural based households, and urban life does not offer a decent way out. Rather than permanent migration to the city, circular migration will continue to be an important trend and a revitalization of rural spaces is required; not only to improve rural living standards, but also to better prepare migrants for life in the city.

Stephan Sonnenberg et al.'s analysis also focuses on rural areas; in their case in the country of Bhutan. Their article discusses the findings of a bold experiment to structure a business according to a Buddhist-inspired model of corporate ethics. The paper highlights a governance innovation that incentivizes the managers of a business to make decisions that serve the interests of a broader set of stakeholders, including not only the owners and shareholders of a company, but also the producers, farmers and communities situated further up along its supply chain. This organizational structure, while premised on a slower and less immediately profit-driven model of corporate growth, is not only ethically more defensible from a Buddhist viewpoint, but also (the authors claim) a source of remarkable resilience during times of market turbulence. More generally, their study illustrates a strategy whereby the private sector, supported perhaps by favorable government regulations and values-driven consumers and investors, can build more sustainable livelihoods in Asia's remaining rural areas, thus counteracting the tide of rural-to-urban migration and the many social, cultural, ecological, and equity disasters that often accompany that trend.

III. Imagining Alternative Futures in West Asia

Taking place less than a century after the end of European colonialism

on the continent, the return of Asia may be understood as part of an ongoing postcolonial reconfiguration of the world order. It is instructive to recall, for instance, that India, which is now considered as a potential global superpower, only gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1947. Indonesia declared its independence in 1945, but it was only in 1949 that the country's former colonial ruler, the Netherlands, formally recognized Indonesia as a sovereign nation. Ever since their independence, postcolonial Asian nations have sought to articulate their own visions of transformation and progress. The 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, attended by twenty-nine newly independent countries representing more than half of the world's population, marked a key moment in this regard. Although the primary objective of the conference was to promote Asian-African economic and cultural cooperation, many of the attendees also discussed the challenges and prospects of building Asian and African futures different from those that had been imagined in Europe previously (Wright, 2008 [1954]: 271-284; Umar, 2019: 463; Prashad, 2007: 31-50).

The second part of this special issue turns its attention to West Asia, and it focuses on attempts by West Asian intellectuals in the latter half of the twentieth century to develop alternative visions of the future by drawing on local cultural and religious traditions. These intellectual efforts, as the articles note, took place against the backdrop of the historical processes of colonization and decolonization. The expansion of European colonialism in West Asia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw efforts by Muslim intellectuals such as Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) to draw on the Islamic tradition in order to mobilize popular anti-colonial resistance (Keddie, 1968). Likewise, in the latter half of the twentieth century, as newly independent Muslim-majority societies sought to shake off colonial imprints and legacies, some of their intellectuals undertook an endeavor to delink from colonial and Eurocentric paradigms

of progress and to envisage alternative futures through a reengagement with and a reinterpretation of local religious and cultural traditions (Rahman, 1982; Mahmood, 2011; Vahdat, 2015). Against the background of colonial and postcolonial conditions, an ongoing search for authenticity, and a renewed interest in cultural heritage, prominent Muslim ideologues articulated conceptions of progress and change in which the past and the future, tradition and modernity, are linked in a continuum.

Alena Kulinich's article focuses on the uses of Mu'tazilism, a rationalist tradition of Islamic thought that flourished during the 'Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258), as a symbol, model and a source of inspiration for the visions of West Asian future. Modern endeavours to rediscover and revive this tradition, often referred to as Neo-Mu'tazilism, span across geographical, cultural and political divides. Exploring its appeal in these diverse contexts, the paper highlights the changing perceptions of this tradition. It discusses various interpretations of Mu'tazilism as a symbol of progress, freedom, and a better future, inspired by Mu'tazilite rationalism, their doctrine of free will, and the idea of the 'golden age' of Islamic civilization under the 'Abbasids. The discovery and publication of Mu'tazilite sources from the 1960s onwards have enabled a deeper exploration of Mu'tazilite thought. Several Muslim intellectuals have engaged creatively with its various aspects to envision the revival and reform of Islam. As a rationalist tradition, today Mu'tazilism remains the subject of great expectations and a potential source of inspiration for the new visions of tomorrow in West Asia and beyond.

Siavash Saffari's article takes Iran in the latter half of the twentieth century as its starting point, and it asks how did Iranian postcolonial thinkers articulate their alternative visions of a de-westernized future? In particular, his article focuses Jalal Al-e Ahmad's (1923–1969) controversial 1962 book titled *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication), which harshly criticized what it saw as a Western-centric modernization program in Iran under the rule

of the Pahlavi dynasty, and which articulated an alternative de-westernized vision for Iran's future. The article argues that while Al-e Ahmad saw industrialization and modernization as the inevitable fate of all human societies, he nevertheless insisted that Iran and other countries in the global South ought to pursue industrialization and modernization without Westernization.

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