'A little knowledge is a useful thing': paradoxes in the Asian Studies experience in Australia

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The International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) is a postdoctoral research centre based in Leiden and Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Its main objective is to encourage the interdisciplinary and comparative study of Asia and to promote national and international cooperation in the field. The institute focuses on the human and social sciences and on their interaction with other sciences.

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Asian studies is a strange beast. Until the 1950s there was no such thing. Scholars interested in Asia worked within disciplines such as history or anthropology, or in an esoteric field generally called Orientalism, which featured the meticulous study of classical texts from Asian religions and civilizations. Then Asia began to loom large in the world. Japan’s post-war recovery seemed to herald an Asian half-century in which Asia would not just catch up to the West but overtake it. Chinese communism presented the world with a dramatic experiment in massive social and cultural transformation which was - to different audiences - as exciting and as alarming as the Bolshevik revolution had been earlier in the twentieth century. The message was repeated, too, in smaller Asian countries - in the revolutionary discipline of the Vietnamese, the self-reliance of India and the economic miracles of Singapore and South Korea - so that Asia as a whole seemed to have something special, something not to be found in the Middle East, Africa or South America.

The Rise of Asia
The rise of Asian studies coincided with the emergence of area studies in the United States education system (and in systems like that of Australia which were influenced by the American model). To its practitioners, however, Asian studies was something more: it was area studies that had the potential to become core studies. The rest of the area studies endeavour was dominated by the rival concepts of nation-building and dependency. The central research issue for area studies in general was finding ways in which ‘backward’ states might create nations, and ways in which those nations might in turn ‘catch up’ to the West in terms of economic development and democracy. Some scholars within the area studies approach took a more pessimistic view of the structural factors which seemed to prevent this process. There was, however, no counterpart in African
or Latin American studies to the idea of 'provincializing Europe', later articulated by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000).

Whereas the cases of Africa and Latin America could cast some doubt on the Western-style modernity model and on the validity of modern moral values, they did not set up an alternative model of modernity in the way that the proponents of 'Asian Values' did in the 1980s and 1990s (Barr 2002). Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 had inspired people in the rest of Asia to look for those elements of Japanese culture and policy that might offer them strategies for modernizing their own societies, but the remarkable feature of the Asia boom of the second half of the twentieth century was the extent to which Westerners were willing to look to Asia for strategies to deliver business success. There was no historical parallel to the eagerness with which Western management experts tried to learn the secrets of Japanese management success and of Chinese business networking. Observers sometimes predicted that the 21st century would be a Pacific Century, incorporating also the dynamic economy of the western seaboard of the United States, but the real leader of the future seemed to be Asia.

Even the growing post-modern angst and disillusion with a Western civilization that had delivered the world atomic weapons, the Holocaust and unprecedented environmental destruction seemed to point in the direction of lessons to be learnt from Asia. It was no accident that Foucault, wanting to show that the West did not have a monopoly on sophisticated systems of language, turned to China for the fictitious example of a provocative classification of animals which included such categories as 'emballmed', 'stray dogs', 'drown with a very fine canel hair brush' and 'that from a long way off look like flies' (Foucault 1979).

Asia, then, was a place where important lessons could be learned, and the people to identify those lessons were called Asianists. Like the Orientalists, they spoke one or more Asian languages, but their orientation was to the present rather than to the classical past. They typically drew insights from more than one discipline, blending history, geography, politics, anthropology and a smattering of economics. They spent long periods in 'their' country as part of their training, often developing close friendships with people there, and they would return there repeatedly. And they were engaged with politics, sometimes as partisans of one view or another, more often as mediators, interpreting Asia to the West (and sometimes the West to Asia) as a way of ironing out misunderstandings and prejudices in what were increasingly complex relationships.

Asian studies under siege

Some time in the late 1980s, however, things began to go wrong. Most obviously, there was a counter-attack on area studies from those adhering to academic disciplines. The core of the attack seems to have been a profound irritation at the 'spoiler' role that area studies had taken on itself. That is, specialists on the West were tired of hearing Asianists stand up in conferences and seminars and say, in effect, 'Well, I work on Japan/China/Indonesia/India etc. and they don't do that'. The irritation arose from the fact that Asianists possessed language competence and local knowledge which made their objections unanswerable, yet they often had neither the interest nor the capacity to turn that knowledge into theoretical insights.

Viewed from outside, the Asian studies world seemed to have some of the characteristics of a sheltered workshop: the special qualifications required for the close study of Asia seemed to be being used as an excuse for insufficiently rigorous thinking. Asianists might argue to the academic mainstream that it was impossible to understand the world without studying Asia, but their own work rarely showed any serious comparative dimension, whether beyond, or even within, Asia. Rare and shallow comments by Asianists in the West on their own societies did not help to convince the academic mainstream that the study of Asia was likely to produce remarkable new insights. See, for example, Anderson (1972). This chapter had enormous influence in Indonesian studies because it made a plausible essentialist argument about the character of Javanese political culture, yet the crude description of Western conceptions of power set out in the chapter by way of comparison was little more than a caricature. After three decades of Asian studies, there seemed to outsiders to be a gap between Asia's promise of a new and different modernity and the intellectual products of the Asian studies endeavour.

The 1980s, it will be remembered, also marked the onset of the modern era of economic rationalism in which national economies were to be opened to the cold winds of competition in order to improve quality and efficiency. The same sentiments also gained strength in academia, and powerful arguments began to be made that those studying Asia should not shelter behind the intellectual tariff barrier of a separate field. Rather they should compete with the mainstream disciplines in an open marketplace of ideas. Asian studies was by no means the only field to be buffeted by the cold winds of academic rationalism. Other fields - economic history, traditional geography, and traditional literary studies, for instance - suffered a good deal more as changing disciplinary fashions eroded their intellectual underpinnings.

The suspicion of discipline specialists towards Asian studies was exacerbated by the connection of area studies with the global interests of the US. Many scholars have pointed out that area studies at American universities was kick-started by funding from US government agencies seeking to create a cadre of
specialists who would be able to advise on the best way to push local conditions in the direction of American interests (Katzenstein 2001; Cummings 1997). Especially during the Cold War and the Vietnam War, many American academics developed a profound distrust for their government, and they projected this distrust on to academic enterprises that appeared to be serving the interests of the government, whether wittingly or unwittingly.

To the extent that this observation was true, and area studies was boosted by an expansionist US state keen to generate expertise about both its informal empire and the realms of its enemies, Asian studies suffered significantly from the end of the Cold War. Francis Fukuyama’s pronouncement that history had come to an end (Fukuyama 1989) implied that the argument in favour of a US-style economy and polity had been won and that there was no need to pay special attention to the rest of the world, because the destiny of the rest of the world was, sooner or later, to become like America. In the eyes of some policy-makers, Asian studies suddenly had little more than archaeological interest. Of course, there was never a comprehensive turning against Asian studies, but official signals that the field was not in favour contributed to a significant downturn in funding and enthusiasm.

The tenor of the debate over area studies and Asian studies was also marred by suggestions of implicit racism amongst Asianists. Some of those who attacked Asian studies saw themselves as attacking the proponents of cultural determinism, as attacking the tendency of some scholars to retreat into culture as catch-all explanation for different outcomes. Cultural determinism, it has to be said, was one of the most common lessons which opinion-makers such as journalists drew from the Asian studies endeavour. Not only was it easy to explain complex phenomena by saying ‘That’s what the Chinese/Japanese/Indians/Vietnamese do’, but the arguments of cultural determinism tended to be based on a relatively sophisticated and positive view of Asian cultures. To its opponents, however, cultural determinism seemed to embody implicitly racist assumptions about the capacity of human beings. It seemed to suggest incapacity on the part of Asians to be modern (which is to say, modern in a Western way). These scholars did not want to uphold an approach which opened the possibility of endorsing a compromise of the principles of universal human rights and values. In this sentiment, the opponents of area studies were partly influenced by the specific political situation in the United States, where arguments in favour of cultural determinism seemed slide easily into notions of biological determinism and thus to endorse the continuing social difficulties faced by black Americans.

The opponents of Asian studies also perceived Asian studies as a field which lent itself to the pluralist side in what became known as the Asian Values debate.

The pluralist view held that Asian values were different from those of the West and that Asians characteristically valued collectivity over the individual, meaning that Western conceptions of individual human rights were not entirely appropriate to Asian societies. At least in some cases, advocates of Asian Values therefore proposed a more relaxed attitude to human rights violations and to limitations on democracy than was common in the West. The universalist opponents of the Asian Values argument saw it as little more than casuistry intended to provide an intellectual defence for authoritarianism and the abuse of individual human rights in Asian countries. Although elements of the Asian Values debate had antecedents in much earlier discussions about the respective characters of East and West, the debate took a particularly lively turn in the years following the end of the Cold War when the West often seemed triumphalist. In fact, this association of Asian studies with Asian Values was mistaken: Asian studies itself was divided on the issue, and many Asianists argued passionately that parts of the pluralist position in the Asian Values debate were vacuous and self-serving. Their ability to see the complexity of the situation within Asian countries, however, often made it more difficult to present their more subtle arguments effectively.

Asianists themselves sometimes weakened their own case. One of the strongest themes in Asian studies has been the argument that a central part of the discipline ought to be the bringing to life of the perspectives of Asians themselves. J. C. van Leur’s celebrated rebuttle to Dutch historians for writing the history of the Indonesian archipelago from the point of view of the Dutch, rather than from that of the region’s own people was an opening shot in a long battle which eventually engulfed much of the social sciences and humanities and which provided the basis for attention to groups which were not in power in society: to women, to the poor, to ethnic, religious and sexual minorities and so on. Although this argument was backed by the strong moral principle that Asian societies should not simply be the object of study by outsiders and by the intellectual-moral argument that the task of scholarship was to bring to the fore the perspectives of as many different categories of humans as possible, the effect of the argument was to endorse a kind of intellectual apartheid, in which Asia was the proper topic of study for Asians and the West the proper topic for Westerners. At its worst, the argument entailed a surrender to credentialism: to the notion that people who belong to a particular group are intellectually and morally better qualified to study it than outsiders. If Asians then were the best people to study Asia, what long term future might exist for Asian studies as a field in the West? This argument, to be sure, was only occasionally heard in terms as stark as this, but the implication was there and it did not work in favour of Asian studies as a whole.
The rising stars of post-modern or cultural studies also attacked Asian studies, accusing it of being no more than old Orientalism in new clothes. In particular, they accused area studies of privileging categories (Asia, Southeast Asia, individual nation-states) whose analytical existence served the interests of the West, rather than those of the people of those parts of the world (Rafael 1994). This attack reflected in part the fact that Asian studies had generally not tried to distinguish itself sharply from Orientalism. Rather, it had carried elements of the meticulous scholarship of the old orientalist traditions while embracing the exciting new possibilities offered by creatively combining disciplines. It was vulnerable, therefore to the cultural studies rebuke.

Finally, Asian studies was still further weakened by the character of its relationship with scholarship in Asia. Except in Japan, the study by Asians in Asia of other Asian counties was institutionally and intellectually weak. It was rare that a Western scholar of Asia would turn to Asian scholarship on other parts of Asia, and most of the small number of Asian scholars who specialized successfully in other parts of Asia found careers in the West rather than in their home countries. Although Western organizations have now put resources into encouraging the study of Asia in Asia, non-national Asian studies in Asia remains weak and it provides Asian studies in the West with little intellectual back-up. The focus of scholars in Asia on their own specific societies, rather than on other parts of Asia, meant that they were often the intellectual counterparts of precisely those discipline-based scholars in the West who were the opponents of Asian studies. The intellectual imperatives of their own academic worlds did not make them natural advocates for the Asian studies endeavour in the West.

Viewed from within Asian studies, the attacks from the disciplines seemed unprovoked and unwarranted. Convinced of the importance of studying Asia, Asianists had given little public thought to how their field might establish a recognized intellectual niche for itself in the larger academic world. Asian studies had emerged at much the same time as environmental studies, and to some extent Asian studies was carried along on the coattails of the promises of new problem-solving methodologies which environmental studies seemed to make possible. Asianists did not appreciate how much their way was smoothed by the vastly larger environmental studies juggernaut, nor how deeply discipline-based specialists could be offended by the highly empirical approach of the Asianists and by their selective and sometimes simplistic choice of methodologies and theories. In retrospect, it is probably true to say that the attack on Asian studies was no more than an exposure of a previously protected field to the rigorous intellectual and institutional buffering that was characteristic of academic life in general. Asian studies as a field, moreover, was never subject to the vitriol hurled at some new academic fields such as cultural studies (or indeed the invective that was sometimes to be heard within different branches of Asian studies itself). Nonetheless, Asian studies was poorly prepared to counter the multiple attacks of the late 1980s and 1990s, and it suffered in consequence.

This debate over the importance of Asian studies took place within a characteristically intellectual-moral academic discourse. At the heart of the debate were two issues: what intellectual value did the study of Asia add to the human intellectual endeavour in general? And what were the power implications of current arrangements for the study of Asia (did Asian studies as practised in the 1980s and 1990s allocate power unjustly)? It is probably fair to say that neither question has yet been satisfactorily answered.

The Australian paradox

Of all Western countries, Australia seemed for some time to have achieved the greatest success in Asian studies. Despite its relatively small population, it produced during the 1970s and early 1980s a formidable cohort of Asian studies scholars and a thoroughly impressive Asia-oriented curriculum. Attention to Asia was a serious part of the curriculum in almost every university in the country and Asian languages (Japanese, Chinese and Indonesian) were widely taught in schools, including primary schools.

Australians were strongly influenced, of course, by intellectual trends in the US and Europe, and the growth of Asian studies in Australia was driven partly by the same factors that were at work in other parts of the West. The special strength of Asian studies in Australia, however, rested on two local factors. First was the sense of proximity to Asia. Of course this proximity was only relative, but from an Australian point of view the eight hour plane journey between Sydney and Singapore constituted a local excursion when compared with the 22 hour trip to Europe. Australia, moreover, was closer than Europe or the US to being in the same time zone as much of Asia (a factor which became paradoxically more important when the growth of the Internet and the availability of cheap telephone calls made real time communication easier than it had been in the past). Proximity once meant danger – the Second World War which brought Japanese forces to the Australian coastline is the only time since the start of European settlement that settler control of the Australian continent was seriously threatened. As memory of the war receded, however, proximity meant opportunity, more in particular economic opportunity. Especially when Britain's accession to the European Economic Community ended Australia's formerly privileged access to British markets, the growth of markets in Asia seemed to be Australia's lifeline.

Asia was also tied up in complex ways with the fragile Australian identity.
Despite their profound cultural debts to Britain and the US, Australians have consistently sought to define a national identity distinct from their distant, powerful allies. As early as the period immediately after the Second World War, Australia had a special relationship with Asia. This claim began as a simple observation that Australia’s strategic interests in Asia were likely to be different from those of Britain or the United States and that both good neighbourliness towards Asian countries and a sound knowledge of their societies and cultures was important to Australia in a way that it was not to other Western states. To the extent that they cared about such things, Australians were proud that any Westerner in Indonesia who spoke Indonesian was commonly assumed to be Australian, because Australians took the trouble to learn the language of their neighbours. The claim grew more ambitious, with the debateable assertion that Australia had never been a colonial power and that its mild nationalist struggle against the British and its strong egalitarian traditions gave it an affinity with formerly colonized states in Asia. In the 1970s, the claim was also partly a vigorous assertion that Australia had put behind itself the notorious White Australia Policy which had been directed against Asian immigration into Australia. The most extravagant hope was that Australia would somehow be more important in the world if it could position itself as a bridge between the West and Asia.

By the 1980s, the position of Asian studies seemed to have become so strong that prominent Asiaists argued for ‘mainstreaming’ Asia in the curriculum. The plan was that the Australian education system would come to regard Asia as a natural part of every curriculum and no-one would consider himself or herself either educated or even just trained without serious exposure to Asian cases in whatever discipline he or she studied (Ingleson 1989). This moment of supreme optimism, however, was short-lived. Despite the still growing importance of Asia to the West and to Australia in particular, during second half of the 1980s, the Asian studies movement appeared to enter a period of decline. Indeed, a report prepared by the Asian Studies Association of Australia in 2002 painted a gloomy picture: an aging cohort of academic teachers and researchers on Asia who are not being replaced as they retire; static or declining enrollments in Asian languages and studies courses; and meagre government and institutional support (Fitzgerald et al. 2002). After the 2004 tsunami, too, which devastated the Indonesian province of Aceh and generated a massive inflow of Australian aid to Indonesia, there were complaints that Australia could not deliver enough Indonesian translators and interpreters, let alone enough language-competent engineers, health professionals and the like for the relief effort.

Identifying the precise extent of the problem is difficult. The number of historians of Asia working at Australian universities has declined seriously, but so has the number of historians in general. Many Asian studies departments have disappeared, but there has been a general trend in Australian universities to fold smaller departments into larger administrative units, mainly so that they can support the substantial administrative staff needed to meet the compliance requirements of the Australian university system. Enrolment in Indonesian studies, both language and non-language has declined significantly, but this decline is certainly related to the specific perception that Indonesia has become a more dangerous destination. Since the first Bali bomb in 2002, the official travel advice provided by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has warned Australians against travel to Indonesia in view of the threat of terrorist attacks. This advice, which is taken to have legal implications for insurance purposes and for the duty of care which Australian employers and educational institutions have towards their staff and towards students, has had a serious specific impact on interest in studying Indonesia.

Calm discussion of the problem has been hampered by the intrusion once again of the issue of racism. Because of Australia’s indefensible history of overt racial discrimination in its immigration policy for nearly three quarters of a century, and because of the continuing unresolved issue of the relationship between settler communities and the Australian Aborigines, Australian academics are especially sensitive to the possibility that antagonism towards, or even lack of interest in, Asia is a consequence of a deep-seated national racism. For many Asiaists, the perception that ordinary Australians had been looking for a good excuse to drop Asia from their view of the world was confirmed by the outpouring of sympathy for an Australian woman, Schapelle Corby who was sentenced in 2005 to 20 years in jail in Indonesia on charges of smuggling marijuana from Queensland to Bali. A well-organized campaign to assert Corby’s innocence included claims – some reasonable, some unreasonable – about the Indonesian legal system and to a brief but sharp storm of indignation directed against Indonesia. The incident, however, was tangled with issues of gender and the media manipulation of human interest stories, so that it was far from clear that racism towards Indonesia was the main factor at work.

Gainsaying the Corby story, moreover, as well as the downturn in Asian studies in some parts of the educational system, is the growing complexity of Australia’s involvement with Asia beyond bilateral government relations and beyond the Asian studies world of the universities. Business engagement is growing and people-to-people contacts are multiplying in cultural, technological, religious, and social fields. For an increasing number of Australians, a sojourn in Tokyo, Beijing, Hong Kong or Singapore is as natural a part of personal and career development as was once a sojourn in London. Quite apart from the
over-exaggerated phenomenon of mail-order brides, too, there are now tens of thousands of Australians whose spouses or partners come from Asia. Even in academia, geologists, economists, engineers, pharmacologists, medical scientists and a host of other researchers and teachers are routinely including the study of Asia in their teaching and research.

“To the distress of ‘real’ Asianists, what most of these people discover is that a little knowledge is a useful, rather than a dangerous, thing. A few, of course, blunder in and make serious mistakes, but many of them discover that much of modern Asia is no more alien or difficult than the United States or France. They learn that speaking Korean badly is better than not speaking it at all, that an intimate knowledge of Jakarta politics is not necessary for running a health club in Bali. And they have discovered the Internet, so that the status of Asianists as dutiful keepers and generous transmitters of difficult-to-obtain knowledge about Asia has been significantly eroded. A competent Internet researcher is capable of acquiring everything from a pithy comment on the Philippine police force to the identity of the Mongolian finance minister in 2002 to a detailed report on the social consequences of dam construction in Laos to the cultural significance of Khajuraho temple in India. We are coming close to the point, moreover, at which automated translation programmes will begin to erode the special advantage of language competence.

Conclusion
When Asia was a mystery, Asianists were the gatekeepers to a world of glittering promises and terrifying threats. As Asia becomes routine, those who want to take part in it feel that they can bypass us. In some respects it is as an encouraging sign of the maturity of Australia’s engagement with Asia that two or three generations of Asianists have started to work themselves out of a job. The Asian studies endeavour which spearheaded Australia’s engagement with Asia in the decades after the Second World War was a promise of future long-term commitment and that commitment is being fulfilled.

The risk in this turn of events is obvious: that a little knowledge will seem to be enough and that Australia will end up with insufficient specialists to address the complex issues that only those with a deep knowledge can tackle effectively. Not everyone would even see this outcome as necessarily bad: in the globalized economy, jobs of all sorts are being exported from one country to another and a narrow-minded economist might well argue that Australia’s interests would be served better by buying detailed analysis of Asia piecemeal, as we need it, rather than sustaining an expensive and inflexible establishment of home-grown Asianists.

The most obvious path for Asianists under these circumstances is to move higher up the knowledge food chain. Rather than delivering knowledge which has now become available on the Internet, we should be fulfilling our original claim that no-one wanting to understand the world can do so effective without taking account of the huge range of human experience in Asia. In other words, we have to play a more effective role as public intellectuals, using the insights derived from Asian studies to make contributions to issues within our own societies. If this means that Asia specialists will also be able to apply a deeper understanding of their own societies to the study of Asia, that is all to the good.

Bibliography