

EastAsiaNet.eu Workshop: *Mistaking Asia*

Leeds (UK), 30-31 May 2008

Gregory B. Lee

University of Lyon (Jean Moulin)

Institut d'Etudes Transtextuelles et Transculturelles (IETT – EA4186)

Taking Asia for an Object – The Big Mis-Take

When the title for this workshop was first mooted, the intention was to discuss the ways in which we perceive and represent or misrepresent this part of the world called increasingly 'Asia'.

But are we Asianists? Until recently Asia was still called the Far East – in France it still often is. When I was at SOAS I was a member of the Far East Department, when I worked at the BBC I worked at the Far East Desk. But as I recall the sinologists and japanologists at SOAS had little to do with each other even though we shared the same roof and the same head of department who was a Mongolianist so as to establish a sort of neutrality between the two. For the BBC and the Daily Telegraph the Far East included not only what we now call East and South East Asia but also the former Indian Empire or South Asia. At SOAS the Far East had a less far-reaching less imperialist connotation.

The 1960s saw the European reorganisation of the study of China and Japan. It was the era of the Cold War, and for the West's allies the era of post-War economic expansion. Both Japan and China mattered. But the emphasis was now on studying not only the language -although this competence remained central- but on making the object of study more scientific – the social sciences started to take prominence in the

study of Asia.

In the United States the giant professional body now called the AAS the Association of Asian Studies had changed its name from Far Eastern to Asian, but this was less in the spirit of political correctness, less a recognition that it was and is still the West that invented the East, but in an effort to expand and academically colonize an even larger space, that of Asia geographically defined.



This is all part of the history of the modern epistemology of what we all here to day do. But still does not answer the question what is Asia – apart from this space that we have named on the map – and what/who is an Asianist. Collectively we here today may constitute a group of scholars who work on various part of a region we have chosen to call East Asia – but again where are its boundaries – but most if not all of us are disciplinary specialist of one country or linguistic space.

As my former colleague Harry Harootunian a major historian of Japan, we spent four years together at Chicago, wrote in an essay on “Area Studies” a decade ago: “It has been one of the enduring ironies of the study of Asia that Asia itself, as

an object, simply doesn't exist.”¹

Despite the best designs of map-makers, all that cartographers have done has been to represent “an age-old fantasy...reinforced by requirements of World War Two”. Asia is finally only a simulacrum over which hovers the optimistic “expectation that something out there will eventually correspond to it or be made to align with it.”²

East Asia, sometimes called North-East Asia, is a sort of sub-set of this greater simulacrum, that for the non-specialist has little sense, at least in France where most people would find it difficult to distinguish between Thailand and Taiwan.

If we are here today, it is because we see some sense, some common interest in banding together around our ill-defined object, an object that to quote Harootunian again “vanishes before our eyes once we seek to apprehend it.”³

But is there anything apart from political and economic self-interest that can justify and give substance to our “East Asia”. How many of us have actually addressed Asia or East Asia as an entity? Most of us, like our Big Brothers in America in the AAS, break down what we do into “discipline and/or national society”.⁴

Let us be honest, we are not specialists of East Asia, but rather specialists of nation-states or would-be nation states. Of course, there are those very gifted amongst us who may be competent in more than one nation-state or linguistic culture, but by

1 Harry Harootunian, "Tracking the Dinosaur: Area Studies in a Time of "Globalism" " in Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, p.25.

2 Harootunian, p.25.

3 Harootunian, p.25.

4 Harootunian, p.27.

and large, although all of us are sensitive and comparatively knowledgeable about our academic neighbours interests and concerns, we remain anchored to our own sub-area.

Harootunian is right to remind us of the origins of area studies in post-World War Two psychosis of being over-run by the enemy and thus needing to know profoundly and in any way possible that enemy. A half-century after World War Two, a war none of here knew except via the TV screen, Harootunian told us a decade ago “we are still organizing knowledge as if ... confronted by an implacable enemy and thus driven by the desire to know it in order to destroy it or learn how to sleep with it.”⁵



American bubble-gum card, 1951.



Suzy Wong, created by Richard Mason 1957.

But surely after the fall of the Wall, a wall whose existence is being rapidly erased from modern consciousness, after 9/11 and the redefinition of our principal enemy as Al-Qaeda, surely now that the war to wage is on terror and World War Three is just an increasingly distant memory of our youth, surely now we cannot still perceive Asia in these terms.

And yet, as we saw in last year's papers, Asia is once again perceived as a

5 Harootunian, p.28.

menace and a risk, as an economic and even political foes, both China and India now are constructed as bogeymen, and in the popular imaginary that means not simply governments and authorities, it means ordinary people Indians, Indian-looking people, people who look Chinese (whether they are Chinese or not).

So we begin to see that Harootunian's analysis goes beyond our half-century flirtation with Area Studies and reaches back and beyond into Europe's and the West's fascination with and revulsion for Asia.

The problem identified by Harootunian is a problem of epistemology but also of ideology. At the outset, the objective of Area Studies was laudable – to transcend disciplinary and national boundaries. In America, at least, this objective was undermined by the strong links that were forged with Washington policy-making and serving national interests. The question for us now is whether we can conceive of, and do, area studies differently.

One of the other problems with East Asia as an epistemological category is historical, or rather to do with official nation-state history and the refusal in Asia to tell an Asian history. Certainly in cultural and intellectual modern history there is a reality of the circulation of ideas and people and texts and practices that meshes together the Chinese mainland, Korea, Japan and Taiwan, and even parts of South-East Asia wherever and whatever that is. That reality is the period of Japanese colonialism, not just in its fascist, military moment, but even before and beyond that political history. China's epistemological debt to Japan is enormous and correspondingly enormously unspeakable. The categorisation of knowledge along

Japanese lines, the importation not just of scientific disciplines, but their literal translations from Japan to China is largely ignored today. The circulation of ideas was not simply one way. Japan was also fascinated by China even in the modern period. The novelist Yokomitsu Riichi declared Shanghai in the 1920s the most modern metropolis in the world, which indicates that not only was industrial capitalism part of the process and practice of modernity but colonialism itself, the physical presence of the West in the East.⁶

Obviously, the experience of war, the humiliation of defeat, the recognition of a complex intermeshing of a century and submission to and participation in colonial and barely mediated Western practices, is not the most fertile ground on which to construct a vision of Asia or even East Asia. But if that “East Asia” ever exist it will inevitably need to recognize and incorporate that history.

In other words, while we may try to see (East) Asia as an object, scientifically from the outside, the presence of the West in the East is inescapable. There is no East-West divide, no innocent Asia-Europe encounter or exchange. History has rendered such an epistemology impossible. Since the middle of the 19th century Asia increasingly is the West, or America, or the globe. The West, Europe, America is embedded in the fabric. If we have attempted in our little scientific corner to know Asia, how much more have the nation-states of Asia sought to know us. We are known, we are studied, imitated, integrated. For this Asia we have imagined, there has

⁶ See Yokomitsu Riichi, *Shanghai: a novel*, translated with a postscript by Dennis Washburn, Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 2001.

been no choice. The real sense of colonialism is not the story of physically oppressing or invading other nations, but having obliged the Other to adopt and integrate the West's practices and epistemologies of knowledge.

This is real, this is reified, this cannot be undone. But this is not all negative. While if the Westerner is trapped in her or his prison-house fantasy of the Orient (zen and martial arts) there is no obligation even to be vaguely interested in Asia. If we as academics in our disciplines do Asia, we remain marginal, ourselves objects of curiosity to our mainstream colleagues. Nothing obliged us to do what we do. We could take it or leave it. We took it.

But the Asian consumer-citizen, the Asian academic cannot take it or leave it. Western practices, Western knowledge and culture, Western organisation even of local Asian knowledge and culture, is obligatory and already ingrained, breathed, integrated.

Go to any off-campus academic bookshop in China, part from the organization of knowledge which is identical to the West, the shop will be full of translations of all categories of scientific knowledge even everything that we have ever written about Asia is translated into Chinese.

What would European Studies in an Asian context be, without telling the story of Europe *IN* Asia.

And yet *we* confidently engage in Asian Studies without seeing the illogic of the project. The fact that studying Asia means first of all studying Europe, studying and interrogating ourselves. Often we are blind origins and nature of problems that

we identify in Asia. We are capable of a dehistoricized tunnel vision, capable of critically narrating the horrors of industrial pollution in China without any historical discussion of its origins, whilst sitting amidst the rubbish heaps of Naples we are nonetheless capable of focussing on the pollution of Peking.

I recently attended a Musicology conference in Heidelberg. There were two composers. One Austrian who is acquainted with China, the other Chinese who lives and practices in Germany. The Austrian's music is infused with what he imagines or chooses Asia to be. The Chinese having studied contemporary Western music tries to represent a lived experience of China in what is nevertheless and will always be a fundamentally Western form. Do I mean it is inauthentic? No. But it is a very striking example of the inequality of the Western universalism we have imposed.

The Asian cultural producer or scholar who practises his discipline (music, economics, anthropology), practises a discipline that has come through the West, and yet it is practised locally as a discipline per se. The Chinese rock musician does not do Chinese pop music, s/he does pop music, the Chinese avant-garde artists do not do Chinese avant-garde art, they do art. The Taiwanese anthropologist does not by and large do the anthropology of Taiwan, s/he does anthropology usually somewhere else, whereas the anthropologists that were my students in Chicago now live in Taiwan and do Taiwan. We do China, We do Japan – the place precedes the discipline, the place risks becoming the discipline.

And that is why paradoxically and ultimately Area Studies with their double focus of disciplinary competence and local knowledge are still preferable to old

fashioned sinology and japanology – even in its contemporary form, what I have called modernized sinology in which linguistic competence in modern language has at least become required.

And that is also one reason why should not stop talking about East Asia. What Harootunian has described as the Asian simulacrum may yet be conjured into something more than that, and that moment East Asian studies may become more real.

Perhaps we should give more consideration to what intellectuals who inhabit East Asia are thinking. Our colleague Tamio Nakamura considers himself an East Asian and came to our last meeting in Lyon (October 2007) to present his project for an East Asian Constitution. It may be intangible but out of the intangible comes real practice. Castoriadis spoke of an instituting imaginary, leading to an instituted imaginary.⁷ The constitutions of Revolutionary France and America are examples. The result maybe far from the ideal, but the resulting practice and imagining of the practice are empowered by the originary instituting imaginary.

Asia still needs to be invented in Asia, by Asians. It cannot be invented from the outside, and it cannot reconstituted from some mythical “traditional” past in a way similar to the self-invention and self-imagined nation-states of the past two hundred years. While Venice may be recreated in Macau, it will take an act of forward-looking institutionalizing imagination to create Asia. It should not eventually be more difficult

⁷ See Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, translated by Kathleen Blamey Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.

than inventing Europe.⁸



*Europe in Asia, The Venetia in-door
gambling, shopping and hotel complex,
May 2008*

⁸ A fortnight after this paper was presented, on Friday 13th 2008, Irish voters rejected the EU Lisbon Treaty proposing a greater European integration