Transcultural Asia: Unlearning Colonial/Imperial Power Relations

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"Asia" currently resides at the margins of the academic study of world politics, a.k.a. international relations (IR). This is in contrast to the historical centrality of Asia to the evolution of world politics. It is also in contrast to the centrality of Asian affairs in present-day world politics.

IR produces international knowledge. Its claims to universality render IR both parochial and limited,[1] but such parochialism is not inconsequential for world politics. That IR has limited tools in making sense of "Asia" means that policy-makers are disadvantaged in making sense of the biggest continent on Earth; some of the most populous countries in the world; and some of the most dynamic economies- not to mention civilisations, cultures, religions, dynamics of tradition and change- that have helped to make the world what it is.

Students of IR, too, suffer as a result of IR's limitations. Not being able to make better sense of "Asia" impoverishes our understanding of the international and its production of knowledge.[2] Notwithstanding recent attempts designed toward "worlding IR",[3] our academic field has yet to discover the nature and extent of its impoverishment.

We present this special issue of *Perceptions* as an initial step to making better sense of "Asia" in IR. This is not to overlook the rich literatures in the humanities and other branches of the social sciences (including area studies) that provide knowledge about "Asia".[4] We build on their valuable analyses but try to do something different.

Specifically, this special issue examines how cultures/traditions in Asia have responded to *difference* and *change* over the millennia and what this implies for IR theorising generally, and for "security" specifically. By "Asia", we include all those geographical and cultural linkages that constitute the continent today: e.g., the Indian subcontinent, Turkey and the rest of what was called "Asia Minor", the Mediterranean, the Arab world and Central-Northeast-Southeast Asia. By difference, we mean any challenges to the ideologies, institutions, policies and practices of ruling elites. By change, we mean the globalising dynamics of world politics, not only in terms of the 20th century but also throughout millennia of

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give-and-take between Asia and the rest of the world. Such instances of *difference* and *change* could come in the form of an event like a war or unsanctioned trade, an internal political struggle due to domestic dissent or contending ideological factions, or a more profound contestation due to civilisational encounters as manifested in alternative aesthetics or ways of being.

Put differently, we seek to draw on the problem-solving repertoires of *pre-colonial* Asia to refine our concepts and strategies for *postcolonial* times. This approach aims not to idealise the past. Rather, we seek to recuperate ways of knowing, doing, being and relating that have been lost or marginalised due to centuries of Euro-American hegemony. Not only does this hegemony impose "subaltern" politics on the rest of the world, but it also *freezes in time* indigenous forms of colonialism and imperialism rationalised under the guise of nationalism. As will be seen in the contributions to this special issue, such ways of knowing, doing, being and relating are alive in the practices of non-state actors and their everyday politics.

Some call to "de-colonise", "de-imperialise" and "de-Cold War" Asia.[5] Doing so requires seeing-again: that is, recognising that the continent of "Asia" reflects dynamic civilisational encounters and interactions that have occurred over millennia and will continue to do so. These interactions have produced a large repertoire of coping strategies practised in daily life but rarely recognised in IR studies. We need to draw on this rich pool of thinking, doing, being and relating for IR theorising. A first step is to identify what we need to refine in terms of concepts, theories and methods.

Four central themes resound in this special issue:

- Security is critically important for identity, whether this is articulated in terms of civilisation (Bilgin), cosmopolitanism (Silina), development (Banerjee) or modernity (Ahmed);
- Postcoloniality's security dilemma stems from a disruptive mismatch between pre-colonial and colonial governance structures (Mishra), reflecting unresolved contestations in not just ideology but also worldview (C. Chen), thereby leading to foreign policy preferences that Westphalian IR would label "ambiguous" (B. Chen);
- Yet critical scholars need not reinvent the theoretical wheel: the "Eastern Other" is already in world politics, contributing to what we know today (Hobson), just as Western social science has the epistemological capacity to self-transform into a transcultural discipline (Duffy); and,
- At the same time, we can draw insight from Asia's own traditions, philosophies and discourses for a more globalised IR (Ikeda, Ling).

This approach departs markedly from current understandings of IR. Theorising in IR continues to be dominated by one

paradigm (realism/liberalism) based on one world historical experience (Western, colonial and androcentric). This hegemony totalises problem-solving and problem-framing. For an arena like world politics, where multiple traditions, practices and worldviews apply, such singularity and inflexibility can only lead to a war-like ultimatum: i.e., either you convert to become like us or we will annihilate you. In either case, the result is a losing one for those who have more in their historical and cultural legacies than a realist/liberal, Anglo-American-European colonial patriarchy.

We aim to open conceptual and discursive space in IR not just epistemologically but also ontologically. By recognising and drawing on the multiplicities that have made "Asia" what it is, we aim to globalise IR specifically, and world politics generally. This will help us resolve old problems in new ways, rather than reproduce the same old approaches that tend to fix problems in place, turning them into sites of "intractable" or "eternal" conflict.

Critical theories of IR have long called for such expansions, if not emancipations, in and for the discipline.[6] Postmodernists, poststructuralists, neo-Gramscians and feminists led the movement starting in the 1990s.[7] Constructivists and postcolonialists have joined the chorus more recently.[8] All have focused on the cultural constructions of IR and possibilities for reformulations. In this special issue, we have participants from India, Japan, Taiwan, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States. In terms of academic disciplines, they represent more than IR, including sociology, urban studies, communications and philosophy.

If not IR, then what? One way of approaching "Asia" has been through studying Asian civilisations. Indeed, much has happened along the civilisational front in world politics. Unfortunately, it has bypassed the mainstream of IR. In 1998, the United Nations (UN) resolved to name 2001 as the "UN Year of Dialogue among Civilizations". By chance (or not), that year was also when al-Qaeda operatives attacked the US in New York and Washington, DC, on 11 September. These attacks have hampered the UN's efforts to foster dialogue among civilisations. At the same time, they have highlighted the need for precisely such efforts. Since then, Spain and Turkey, under the auspices of the UN and supported by the European Union (EU) and the Vatican, have formed an "Alliance of Civilisations" to enhance exchanges between "Islam" and "the West". While the discursive jump from "dialogue" to "alliance" has yet to transpire in policy practise, Track II efforts have flourished across the Mediterranean.

Notwithstanding such efforts at reviving civilisational dialogue, we have remained hostage in IR to notions of culture or civilisations as pre-given and unchanging. Richard Ned Lebow's *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*

offers a significant example.[9] A work of magisterial scholarship, the book, nonetheless, fails to recognise the role and impact of "non-Western" cultures, societies, traditions or philosophies on "the West". Instead, Lebow universalises IR in classical Greek concepts only. In so doing, he "eternalises" Anglo-American-European IR, leaving no room for alternative discourses, traditions, norms and practices. Where mainstream IR may acknowledge civilisational encounters, they are seen as a "clash" only between two pristine sets of thought and behaviour.[10]

Most problematic about this "clash" scenario, as Amartya Sen has critiqued, is "the presumption of the unique relevance of a singular classification."[11] There is little appreciation of the interactive dynamism between worlds that lead, eventually, to a hybrid legacy. We see this in conflict resolution, intervention and treatment of migrants and the re-integration of the former East Germany into the "Western" fold.[12] Critical IR scholars have responded by tracing the continuities and disruptions between so-called civilised vs barbaric divides. For example, John Hobson has detailed, in the *Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*, centuries of give-and-take between peoples presumed to belong to distant and distinct civilisations.[13]

Notwithstanding the richness of this critical literature, there is, as yet, no satisfactory response to Huntington's challenge to his critics: "If not civilizations, what?"[14] Seeking to replace "civilisation" with another equally problematic category may not necessarily be a solution. After all, working through the notion of civilisation allows inquiries into the international politics of a category, its emergence and various uses in the worlds of policy and academia. That said, operating with the notion of civilisation as currently conceptualised is too limiting. Not only does it reinforce the differences between civilisations, thereby marginalising attempts to recognise centuries of give-and-take across and within civilisations, but also the conventional take on civilisations tends to fix in place nationalist reactions outside the West to Orientalist impositions, typically reproducing the violence of such in the process.[15]

While IR power centres have treated civilisations as pre-given and unchanging entities, thereby failing to make sense of multiplicities that is "Asia," scholars have long examined the issue of civilisational encounters. We mention only a small sample here. Research by Gerrit Gong and Shogo Suzuki, for example, on "non-Western" responses to the "standards of civilisation" has brought to light the international politics behind the use of civilisational rhetoric.[16] Antony Anghie has pointed to the ways in which contemporary international law rests upon notions of sovereignty developed through interactions shaped by such "standards".[17] Cemil Aydın has connected "anti-Westernism" in Asia to "Western" policy-making, showing how

admiration for the "West" eventually turned into disappointment and resentment in response to European powers' self-serving resort to "standards of civilisation."[18] And Brett Bowden has tracked the evolution of the idea of "civilisation" from its imperial/ist origins to the contemporary era.[19]

We clearly need a fresh take on theorising about civilisations, in general, and "Asia" in particular. IR must recognise the pluralities of and within "Asia", and its mutual dynamics with the rest of the world. IR must also learn ways of thinking, doing and being in "Asia." This new theorising must inquire into the enmeshments that have re-produced similarities as well as differences, traditions as well as change within and between what we choose to refer to as "civilisations." Only in this way can we emancipate IR from its colonialist, imperialist and Cold-War foundations that render international knowledge parochial.

Our special issue for *Perceptions* will be a first step to do so. Please find within the following essays with their respective authors:

- Pınar Bilgin (Bilkent University), "Dialogue of Civilisations: A Critical Security Studies Perspective". Bilgin invites advocates of "civilisational dialogue" to discourse with students of critical security studies. Both sides are tasked to focus on the ways in which civilizations co-constitute each other through dialogue, how insecurities get constructed within as well as between civilizations, and whether emancipatory practices could be adopted with a view to addressing insecurities of multiple security referents.
- Everita Silina (The New School), "Cosmopolitan Disorders: Ignoring Power, Overcoming Diversity, Transcending Borders". Silina questions the notion of cosmopolitanism under globalisation. Cosmopolitanism, she argues, amounts to mere elitism, without due considerations of an identity's intimate dependence on security.
- Payal Banerjee (Smith College), "Energy Security through Privatisation: Policy Insights from Hydroelectric Power Projects (HEPs) in India's Northeast". Banerjee shows how the government of India today continues to define energy resources as a crucial component of national security.
- Rafiul Ahmed (Sikkim University), "Anxiety, Violence and the Postcolonial State: Understanding the 'Anti-Bangladeshi' Rage in Assam, India." Ahmed brings the analysis "inside". A "cartographic anxiety", he finds, still besets the postcolonial state, leading to violence against and repression of religious minorities.
- Binoda K. Mishra (Centre for International Relations and Development), "Nation-State Problematic in Asia: The South Asian

Experience". Mishra argues that the modern state in South Asia has always entwined nationhood with security due to its origins in Western colonialism and imperialism.

- Ching-Chang Chen (Ritsumeikan Asian Pacific University), "History as a Mirror: What Does the Demise of Ryukyu Mean for the Sino-Japanese Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Dispute?" To address this escalating dispute, C. Chen proposes that we need to understand the pre-Westphalian relationship between China and Japan, and the norms that guided state action in this area at that time.
- Boyu Chen (National Sun Yat-sen University), "Sovereignty or Identity? The Significance of the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands Dispute for Taiwan". B. Chen finds that national identity is neither monolithic nor fixed, as highlighted by Taiwanese responses to the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands dispute. Yet Taiwan's ambiguity reflects a typical postcolonial conglomeration of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial identities.
- John M. Hobson (University of Sheffield), "The Paradox of Eastern Agency". Postcolonial efforts to "bring Eastern agency in" need to acknowledge that many scientific racist and Eurocentric scholars of various persuasions already award certain levels of agency to Eastern peoples. Accordingly, we need to be extra careful when conceptualising Eastern agency as the antidote to scientific racism and Eurocentrism.
- Gavan Duffy (Syracuse University), "Justifying Transcultural Studies". Duffy underscores that the seeds of self-transformation towards a transcultural IR already exist *within* Western social science. This contrasts with extremist views on either side of the ideological spectrum that tout "the West is Best" or "Death to America!".
- Josuke Ikeda (University of Toyama, Japan), "The Idea of the 'Road' in International Relations Theory". The concept of a "road," Ikeda argues, could serve as a metaphor for a post-Western IR. It entails comparative studies of ideas and how they have travelled.
- L.H.M. Ling (The New School), "Romancing Westphalia: Westphalian IR and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*". What goes on "inside" and "outside" national borders, Ling contends, need not align geographically given colonial intrusions. Instead, postcolonial IR could articulate world politics culturally and normatively by region. Doing so helps to curb Westphalian hegemony by (1) provincialising the West as one regional world among many and (2) making the Rest visible in all its entwined complexities. Ling refers to the 14th-century Chinese epic *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* as one way to signify East Asia as a regional world.

Endnotes

1 Anna M. Agathangelou and L.H.M. Ling, "The House of IR: From Family Power Politics to the *Poisies* of Worldism", *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (December 2004); Pınar Bilgin, "Thinking Past 'Western' IR?", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2008).

2 L.H.M. Ling, *Postcolonial International Relations: Conquest and Desire between Asia and the West*, New York, Palgrave, 2002; Stephen Chan, "Small Revolutions and the Study of International Relations: The Problematique of Affiliation", *Political Science*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (December 1991); Stephen Chan, "Cultural and Linguistic Reductionisms and a New Historical Sociology for International Relations", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (December 1993).

3 Arlene B. Tickner and Ole Waever (eds.), *International Relations Scholarship Around the World*, London, Routledge, 2009; Arlene B. Tickner and David Blaney (eds.), *Thinking International Relations Differently*, Vol. 1, London, Routledge, 2012; Arlene B. Tickner and David Blaney (eds.), *Claiming the International*, Vol. 2, London, Routledge, 2014.

4 Also see, Stephen Chan, Peter G. Mandaville and Roland Bleiker (eds.), *The Zen of International Relations: IR Theory from East to West*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

5 Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Qudiguo: Yazhou zuowei fanggao* (*Towards De-Imperialization: Asia as a Method*), Taipei, Flaneur Publisher, 2007.

6 Shannon Brincat, Laura Lima and João Nunes (eds.), *Critical Theory in International Relations and Security Studies*, London, Routledge, 2011.

7 J. Ann Tickner and Andrei P. Tsygankov (eds.), *Responsible Scholarship in International Relations: A Symposium* (2008), a special section of *International Studies Review*; Mustapha Kamal Pasha and Craig N. Murphy, "Knowledge/Power/Inequality", *International Studies Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Summer 2002); John M. Hobson, "Is Critical Theory Always for the White West and Western Imperialism? Beyond Westphalian towards a Post-Racist Critical IR", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 33, Supplement S1 (2007); R.B.J. Walker, *One World, Many Worlds: Struggles for a Just World Peace*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1988.

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9 Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

10 Samuel P. Huntington, "Clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer 1993); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

11 Amartya Kumar Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2006, p. 11.

12 Jacinta O'Hagan, "Civilizational Conflict? Looking for Cultural Enemies", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1995); Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996; Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the West*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2006.

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14 Samuel P. Huntington, "If Not Civilizations, What? Paradigms of the Post-Cold War World", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 5 (November/December 1993).

15 Pınar Bilgin, "Civilisation, Dialogue, Security: The Challenge of Post-Secularism and the Limits of Civilisational Dialogue", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (December 2012).

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17 Antony Anghie, *The Third World and International Order: Law, Politics, and Globalization*, Leiden, Martinus Nijhoff, 2003; Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005; Antony Anghie, "Finding the Peripheries: Sovereignty and Colonialism in Nineteenth-Century International Law", *Harvard International Law Journal*, No. 40 (Winter 1999).

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