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*Locating Asia, Arresting Asia:
Grappling with 'The Epistemology that Kills'*

by

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I. The arresting gaze of the Other: Asia is framed

Asia reveals itself, over iced coffee.

A few years ago I found myself walking down Orchard Road in downtown Singapore. I walked past one of those generic coffee-bars that serve beverages that purport to have some family resemblance to coffee; and chanced upon two tourists who were sitting outside as they enjoyed their iced caramel lattes. Both were male, Caucasian, and both were uniformly dressed in some kind of ‘Camel Trophy-Safari’ kind of get-up (presumably to blend in with the background, if not each other). Then one of them said to the other (in French): “I believe that here I have found the heart of Asia”.

That Asia can reveal its heart over iced coffee in a high street urban coffee bar is not surprising, for that is indeed the state of Asia today. Before proceeding any further, I would like to situate this paper/discussion in the context of the here-and-now, which is a *modern* Asia that exists firmly in the modern era.

In this paper I wish to raise a problem; one that I have *not* been able to resolve myself; and one which is itself a symptom of the modern times we live in. That we today are embedded in modernity seems fairly self-evident: Asia’s political boundaries today are basically the same boundaries that were drawn in the 19th century, when colonial-capitalism’s power was at its height. Our nation-states, built as they were on the foundations of colonies of the past (none of which were ever democracies, it could be added) are fundamentally modern constructs in the mould of the Westphalian model. Our epistemologies and vocabularies are likewise modern, replete with references to citizenship, economic agents, assets and commodities, territories and spaces that are often taken as ontologically-set and given. In terms of who and what we are, our sense of identity and what constitutes identities that are Asian are also predicated upon a binary logic where an oppositional form of dialectics is seen to be at work.

As a teacher who is interested in both the history and politics of Asia, I am struck by how *modern* our political concerns and praxis are today: Here in Southeast Asia much of what passes as national and regional politics now comes in the form of contestations over identity and meaning; sometimes in the ways through which we have commodified our identities and claimed them as ‘national’ identities, sometimes in the ways through which we have made claims on others and accused others of cultural/identity appropriation, etc. Jameson (1991), in his work on Postmodernity, has already noted the salient features of late industrial capitalism which we see all around us now: bricolage, commodification and the politics of identity-difference.¹ And in the ways through which we, Asians, today have come to know ourselves and represent ourselves to ourselves and others, we likewise replicate and reproduce the very same modalities of knowing and understanding that Cohn (1996) saw and documented during the colonial era of the 19th century.²

In an Asia where ‘native identity’ can be commodified, bought and sold, a veritable market of the authentic has emerged since the postcolonial era which rests happily within the broader framework of market commodification in general; and where Asians can buy their identities at the mall and engage in different ways of merrily exoticising themselves to their hearts content. Scholars such as Richter (1989) and Burns and Novelli (2007) have written at length about the political economy of tourism in Asia³,

¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press. Durham, 1991.

² Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1996.

³ Richter (1989) has noted that ‘tourism is a highly political phenomenon, the implications of which have only been rarely perceived, and even less understood. Furthermore it matters a great deal whether the public and key policymakers are able to grasp the fact that, although tourism has a carefree frivolous image, the industry is huge, highly competitive, and has acute social consequences for nearly all societies... Today tourism is the largest industry in the world and is expected to maintain that status at least up to the second half of the twenty-first century. In 1985 world-wide tourist expenditure was estimated to be around 1,800 billion dollars. Over 125 nations

and how that industry has not only served as a source of state revenue but also as a means through which Asia's politics of identity has been reproduced and kept alive.⁴ That same tendency towards ossification and arrest (of meaning) has been seen elsewhere by scholars like Talib Ahmad (2008) whose writing on the official historical narratives in some Southeast Asian countries has pointed to the tendency to narrowly select elements of the past to present a flattened-out, homogenous and static reading of history that is both nationalist and essentialist at the same time.⁵

The net result of these processes has been a return to a politics of essentialised authenticity in some parts of Asia, as noted by Tyson (2010), where national identities have been anchored upon essentialised and reductivist readings of culture, and where becoming ('authentically') indigenous has assumed the status of a political-economic project, accompanied by its own political economy that revolves around

in the world consider tourism to be a major industry, and in nearly a third of those countries it is the major national industry, a top earner of foreign exchange and the major source of employment. Even in a country as affluent as the United States, tourism is the second major industry, the largest tradable service export, one of the top three sources of revenue for 39 out of the 50 states, and the employer of 6 million Americans, the country's second biggest employer.' (pp. 2-3) Furthermore 'for many governments the explicit impetus for encouraging tourism is economic. Tourism is sold by the international travel industry as a non-controversial way to accrue foreign exchange without losing non-renewable resources. Tourism is elastic in demand in the way that most agricultural products are not and as a service industry it is sometimes assumed, erroneously, that it is labour-intensive. It is argued that the tourist dollar, via a multiplier effect, infuses the local economy with several times the original dollar's value before its effect fades. Unlike other economic policies, tourism supposedly attracts foreign capital easily, requiring only the inducements most developing nations are willing to accept... But regardless of its initial motivation, the political impact of tourism is extremely important'. (pg. 14) See: Linda K Richter, *The Politics of Tourism in Asia*, University of Hawaii Press, Hawaii, 1989.

⁴ Celebrating the indigenous may well end up being little more than marketing them for the sake of tourist dollars, and as Susan Keitumetse (2007) has argued, the theme of 'primitive', 'culturally pure' and 'uncontacted' *indigeneity* is problematic for the simple reason that it requires the repetition and reproduction of stereotypes about the Other; permanently freezing the indigenous other in terms that are negative and further perpetuating the notion that the viewer/visitor is endowed with a higher moral consciousness and a superior rational sensibility.⁴ Be it in the case of African societies that were studied by Keitumetse or Asian societies, the celebration of ethnic indigenous identity is always problematic, particularly when it also comes under the rubric of the tourist and heritage industries. Susan Keitumetse, *Celebrating or Marketing the Indigenous?* In: Peter M. Burns and Marina Novelli (eds.), *Tourism and Politics: Global Frameworks and Local Realities*, Elsevier Press Advances in Tourism Research Series, Amsterdam and Oxford, 2007. (pg. 110)

⁵ Abu Talib Ahmad's study of the state museums of Malaysia and the representations of history in them notes that in the case of the official state museums of Kelantan, Trengganu, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Sabah there is the tendency for the museum authorities to present an official accounting of the history of each respective state, but in a manner that conforms with the official history of Malaysia as described and narrated in the official history textbooks of the country. Ahmad notes the collusion between official historians and museum curators (pg. 46) and how both institutions effectively reinforce each other's somewhat narrow perspectivism, leaving students, readers and museum visitors with a singular impression of Malaysia's historical development that allows no room for alternative readings of history or contingency in the progression of history. Furthermore as Malaysia's official history came to be written by an increasingly closed-off coterie of historians who were themselves partisan to the needs and agendas of the ruling elite, these official histories (both in books and museums) reflected the narrow and monological perspective of the ruling elite in power. Therefore as Ahmad notes there are scant references to the role played by opposition movements and parties in the historical development of Malaysia, and in some of the state museums there are few references to the hybrid, fluid and cosmopolitan origins of Malaysia: The long historical presence of communities such as the Orang Asli, Chinese, Indian and Arab migrants who later settled in Malaysia, etc. tend to be neglected, marginalised or left out entirely in many of the state museums he studies (pp. 51-52). Another interesting observation that Ahmad makes is that in some of the state museums there are few negative accounts of the Japanese occupation of Malaysia during World War Two, and few references to the atrocities committed by the Japanese armed forces (particularly against the Europeans and Malaysians of Chinese ethnic background). Ahmad contrasts this to the manner in which Singapore's museums have been more explicit and objective in their treatment of the Japanese occupation, regardless of how such accounts of Japanese atrocities were not keenly welcomed by Japanese tourists in Singapore. (pp. 66-67.) [Re: Abu Talib Ahmad, *State Museums and their Representations of the Past in Malaysia*, Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society JMBRAS, Vol. 82 Part 2, 2008, pp. 45-70.]

a buy-off-the-rack mode of cultural production and where Asians can now self-exoticise themselves whenever they feel the need to ‘find themselves’, in accordance with the hegemonic logic of the market.⁶

These developments have naturally occasioned an academic response and much work has already been done on the phenomena of commodified identities and its attendant political economy. Likewise scholars have looked at how identities – both ethnic-national and religious – have been policed by both state and non-state actors across Asia.⁷ As the philosopher Zygmunt Bauman argued recently, ‘the question of identity has changed from something you are born with to a task: You have to create your own identity’⁸ and in the process of making those identities, all manner of tropes, metaphors and overdetermined signs have been put to work.

My own concern has less to do with the political economy of identity politics, or the manner in which identities are constructed and at times contested/claimed by various actors. Rather, my deeper concern lies in the manner in which we have come to know Asia, and been able to make epistemic claims of knowledge about it (Asia and Asians). For apart from the violence of exclusive claims and acts of (sometimes forceful) appropriation, I believe that there is an even deeper level of violence that needs to be addressed, as it strikes at the very heart of our work as teachers, artists and writers. My own focus is not on identity-making and identity-contesting as bricolage, but rather on the violence of naming, and thus knowing. It is a problematic that was raised by Todorov in his important work, *The Conquest of America*.

II. The first act of violence: I name you, and thus I know you.

Nomination is equivalent to taking possession.⁹

**Tzvetan Todorov,
The Conquest of America (1984)**

Todorov’s *Conquest of America* is instructive for us today, for it was in this work that Todorov wrote at length about what he called ‘the knowledge that kills’. In his account of the European conquest of America, Todorov argues that long before the massacres that decimated and destroyed the civilization of the native Americans came another form of violence that was equally catastrophic, and it was in the form of a desire to *know* the Other. Todorov’s Columbus was not merely an explorer who was bent on

⁶ Tyson’s work looks at the revivalism of *Adat* traditions in the outer island provinces of Indonesia following the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998 and the move towards decentralisation of power from the political capital Jakarta to the local governments of the provinces. Many scholars have been critical of the process of decentralisation in Indonesia for the reason that the advocates of decentralisation have often been local elites who stand to gain the most from the dispersal and distribution of power and economic resources; and that many groups and movements that have pushed for further decentralisation have couched their appeals on the discourse of native or local particularism and exclusivism, at times leading to the rise of local variants of micro-nationalism among ethnic communities that seek to re-claim power and territory on the basis of remedial rights and entitlements. In Tyson’s work on the demands that were made by community leaders in Sulawesi he notes that the demands of the Toraja people of *Tana Toraja* were often linked to political demands for greater economic control and access to local resources, but these demands were also catering to the needs of local political parties that no longer claim a national appeal and mandate, but rather that seek to ‘protect’ their territories on the basis on nativist-essentialist claims to belonging and entitlement. As such, *Adat* revivalism was more than an instance of ‘staged authenticity’ and certainly more political in nature and intent. [Re: Adam D. Tyson, *Decentralisation and Adat Revivalism in Indonesia: The Politics of Becoming Indigenous*, Routledge, London, 2010.]

⁷ An instance of such policing was seen recently, when a minor scandal broke out in Thailand over a tourist ad that featured elements of Thai history as well as historical personages who are regarded as being almost sacrosanct in Thailand today. As a result of the furore that ensued, the ad was eventually taken off TV. See: BBC, *Thai Tourism Video Stirs Cultural Heritage Debate*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-37484447>

⁸ Re: Interview with Zygmunt Bauman, *Social Media are a Trap*, in El Pais English edition, 19 January 2016. http://elpais.com/elpais/2016/01/19/inenglish/1453208692_424660.html

⁹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, New York: Harpers Collins. 1984. P. 27.

appropriating the lands and riches of others for his monarch, but an enquirer ‘*who performs a ‘finalist’ strategy of interpretation*’... where ‘*the ultimate meaning is given from the start*’. Columbus does indeed come to conquer and subsequently know the land and people he has conquered, but ‘*he knows in advance what he will find*’, for the Other was already defined in dialectical terms as the constitutive Other to Europe even before he set off on his journey.¹⁰ As Columbus and his men fought their way into the interior of America, he begins to build his own order of knowledge and power through the act of naming the places he visits and plants his flag. Todorov argues that ‘*others’ words interest him very little*’, as Columbus sought to rename places according to the typological ordering that he introduced, and which made sense to him, according to his own register of signification and meaning.¹¹ The up-shot of this enterprise is the *epistemology that kills*; an epistemology that does come to know the world, but from a singular perspective that does not admit the validity of other epistemologies. The foundational act of violence was the *naming of America* itself, for with that singular act an entire continent and all the nations in it were made knowable while rendered voiceless at the same time.

America may have been a nominal construct to the Europeans who conquered it, but it was no mere nominal construct like ‘mountains’ and ‘hills’, ‘traffic jams’ and ‘political crises’ are. America was both a sign and signifier that was loaded with meaning from the outset, and that meaning was subsequently imposed upon both the land and the people who were named.

The relevance of Todorov’s work for our own concerns lies in the way he has identified the root of the problem itself, which lies in the violence that is inherent in the act of *naming*. Granted that we cannot possibly escape language, and that any understanding/experience of the world around us is mediated through language – *one of the premises of discourse analysis being the claim that reality is discursively constructed* – we are still left with the moral and philosophical burden of knowing, and how to know *anything* without doing violence to the thing itself. What holds true for America also holds true for Asia; and if the foundational act of violence meted out upon America came with its naming, then would that not be the case as well for Asia, whose naming was the first step the process of arresting it and rendering it a simple and fixed idea?

As we grapple with the complex project of imagining and re-imagining Asia/s today, it is important to understand how and why we ended up with this predicament in the first place. It might, therefore, be useful for us to return to the beginning, and look at how that singular notion of Asia came about, and how a thing as complex, multifarious and fluid as that could be brought within the arresting gaze of violent scholarship. And like many foundational myths, the etymological roots of ‘Asia’ – as it was seen and defined by Western scholars, was likewise rooted in myths as well.

In 1520, Johannes Boemus published his *Omnium Gentium Mores, Leges et Ritus*, which is regarded as the first work of ethnography produced in the Western world.¹² Translated into other major European languages and re-published throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, the work was considered an authoritative account of societies beyond Europe at the time. Asia appears in the second part of the work, and from the outset is described in terms both mythical and monumental:

‘Asie (Ἀσίη), the seconde part of the thre wherin to we haue said that the whole erth is diuided; tooke name as some hold opinion, of the daughter of Oceanus and Tethis, named Asia (Ἀσία), the wife of Iaphetus, and the mother of Prometheus. Or as others affirme, of Asius, the sonne of Maneye the Lidian. And it stretcheth it self from the South, bowtyng by the Easte into the Northe: hauyng on the Weste parte the two flouddes, the Nilus and Tanais,

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 17.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 27.

¹² So influential was Boemus’ work that many other editions were produced, translated into other European languages. In 1555 William Waterman translated the work and had it published under the title *The Fardle of Facions*, and in 1611 Edward Aston issued a second version under the title *The Manners, Lawes and Customs of all Nations*.

and the whole Sea Euxinum, and parte of the middle earth sea. Vpon the other thre quarters, it is lysted in with the Ocean, whiche where he cometh by Easte Asie, is called Eous (as ye would saie toward the dawning) by the South, Indicus (of the countrie named India) and after the name of the stoure Scithiane, vpon the northe Scythicus. The greate mounteine Taurus ronnyng East and West, and in a maner equally partyng the lande in twaine: leaueth one parte on the Northe side, called by the Grekes the outer Asie: and another on the South, named the inner Asie.¹³

Having advanced from classical Hellenic sources, Boemus' account of Asia extended it beyond the limits that had been set by Herodotus, for whom Asia had stopped at Anatolia and the Persian empire. Boemus lists amongst Asia's peoples the Medeans, Parthians, Persians, Scythians, Tartars and Indians. Of the Indians 'of Ynde', he claims that there lived among them some tribes where the people 'have no neckes, and have their eyes in their shoulders' and others with 'dogges heades'¹⁴ – descriptions that would later be taken up and repeated in the writings and engravings of Sebastian Munster, whom Boemus obviously influenced and inspired. Muster's *Geographia* (1540) and *Cosmographia* (1544) would borrow many of the themes of Boemus' work, and the maps that accompany his writings were full of images of Asians of all sorts, including the famous dog-headed Asiatics and headless men whose faces were found on their chests instead.

That 'Asia' emerges from within the corpus of classical Western mythology is telling, for it means that Asia – though cast and framed as the Other beyond the pale of Europe – was never radically outside the discursive economy of Western mythology. And because the Other is always an 'internal Other' that is bound within the oppositional dialectics of identity and difference, there is never a radically exterior Other that can be known/spoken of. From the outset, Asia is framed in dialectical terms as Europe's constitutive Other, and can only be known thus, in dialectical terms.

The framing of Asia as Europe's Other becomes readily apparent in the writings on Asia that followed in the wake of Boemus' work. For scholars like Theodorus de Bry (and his sons Theodore and Israel de Bry), the encounter with Asia – that was depicted for the first time in their work which offered among the first glimpses of life in India and Java (1601) – was problematic, for it meant having to recognise an Asia that was both civilised and yet different (or more explicitly, non-European).¹⁵ De Bry found it easier to depict the New World that was being discovered in the 15th-16th centuries for there it was possible to frame America in terms that made sense according to the logic of revealed knowledge and scripture: In his work on America there are copious references to the rites and rituals of the native Americans that were described and illustrated in a manner that confirmed the logic of differentiation that separated Europeans from the 'heathens and savages' of the New World, all of which confirmed – in the eyes of de Bry and his readers – what scripture had foretold and which reinforced the distinction between a Eurocentric-Christian understanding of civilisation and what was regarded as pagan barbarism.

Asia, however, could not be depicted and understood in the same manner that the New World had been framed. In de Bry's work, we see some of the first images of India and Java which revealed a complex, dynamic and prosperous Asia whose socio-cultural landscape was likewise complex and rich: In the engravings of the port-city of Bantam (Banten) in Java, we see different communities engaged in trade and politics; ships of all kinds and sizes that hail from different parts of Asia; soldiers and citizens whose dress and accoutrements point to active local industry. Yet despite the complexity of socio-

¹³ From the English translation of the work by Waterman, 1555: ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hakluyt/voyages/

¹⁴ Ibid. Waterman, 1555: ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hakluyt/voyages/

¹⁵ Johan Theodore and Johann Israel De Bry, *Icones Sive Expressae Et Artificiose Delineationes Quarundam Mapparum, Locorum Maritimorum, Insularum, Urbium, & Popularum: Quibus & Horundem Vitae, Naturae, Morum, Habituumque Descriptio Adiuncta est: Veluti Haec Omnia, In India Navigatione Versus Orientem Sucepta, diligenter Obseruata, Adeoque Tribus Hisce Indiae Orientalis Descriptae libris inserta sunt*. Frankfurt, 1601.

economic life that we see captured in these early images, Asia resists exoticisation for the simple reason that much of the dynamism that is captured in de Bry's work also happens to be mundane: trade and commerce, governance and administration, are at work here.

Notwithstanding the fact that Asia was populated by Asians who were every bit as mundane and ordinary as the next European, the tendency to frame Asia as a place that could be known in exotic and extra-ordinary terms would continue in the writings of subsequent authors, such as Walter Raleigh (1614).¹⁶ Raleigh's account of the history of the world takes off from premises that were biblical and European, and in his work an eschatology of sorts can be seen, where Asia marks both the beginning and end of human endeavour. With compass in hand, Raleigh sets off to find the exact location of Paradise, which he argued could be located precisely:

'Of the feate and place of Paradiſe, all ages haue held diſpute; and the opinions and iudgements haue been in effect, as diuers, as among thofe that haue written vp on this part of Genefis, as vpon any one place therein, feeming moft obfcure: fome there are, that haue conceiued the being of a terreftrial Paradiſe, without all regard to the worlds Geographie and without any reſpect to Eaſt and Weſt, or any confideration of the place where Moſes wrote, and from whence he directed the way how to finde out and iudge, in what region of the world this garden was by God planted, wherein he was exceeding reſpectiue and precife.'¹⁷

Through a combination of deft reasoning and some selective appropriation of facts, Raleigh comes to the conclusion that Paradise is real, that it is on earth, and that it is located in the Indies. The maps that accompany his work include references to places that already existed and were real enough, such as Bengal, Malacca, Sumatra, Pegu and parts of maritime Southeast Asia; but also pin-point the exact location of the garden of Eden somewhere in present-day Iraq. But here again it can be seen that Asia can only be understood and rendered knowable to Western eyes from a Western perspective, as the background to a larger cosmic drama taken from Old Testament sources. Nowhere in Raleigh's work does Asia speak for or of itself, and nowhere in the work are any concessions made to the possibility that Asia and Asians may have their own cosmologies and belief-systems that locate the region and its people – both geographically and epistemologically – according to registers that are different.

As a nominal construct, Asia had meaning, and was made meaningful in works such as Raleigh's. In the centuries that followed, Asia's importance and meaningfulness was amplified even further in the writings of Europeans who came to see it as a place that was distinct from Europe, a mirror-inversion and constitutive Other to what Europe was, could be and was meant to be. In both fictional and non-fictional works, Asia was examined and its meaning expanded further: Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium-Eater* (1822)¹⁸ – being itself a biographical work that straddled the fuzzy boundary between non-fiction and the delusional – is a case in point, where Asia is conjured up in the dreams of the Opium addict as a place that was overdetermined in meaning and where the Occidental Self was dwarfed in comparison. After a chance encounter with a mysterious Malay who popped up seemingly from nowhere, Quincey writes about how the encounter had triggered in him a succession of nightmares of an Asia that was vast and overpowering:

'This Malay, partly from the pictareſque exhibition he aſſiſted to frame, partly from the anxiety I connected with him image for ſome days, faſtened afterwards upon my fancy and that upon my dreams, bringing with him other Malays more worſe than himſelf who ran am-muck at me, and led me to a world of nocturnal troubles... That Malay has been a fearful enemy for

¹⁶ Sir Walter Raleigh, *The Historie of the World. In Five Bookes*. London: Printed by Walter Burre, 1614.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, Book I, Chapter 3.I. p. 33.

¹⁸ Thomas Penson de Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, first published in the *London Magazine*, 1821; London: Taylor and Hessey, Fleet Street, 1822; London: Folio Societ. 1948.

months. Every night, through his means, I have been transported into Asiatic scenery... Southern Asia, in general, is the seat of awful dreams and associations. As the cradle of the human race, if on no other ground, it would have a dim, reverential feeling about it. The mere antiquity of Asiatic things, of their institutions, histories, above all their mythologies – is so impressive that to me the vast age of the race and name overpowers the sense of youth in the individual. Man is a weed in those regions... The vast empires, also into which the peoples of Asia have been cast, give a further sublimity to the feelings with Oriental names and images.’¹⁹

And if Asia could be imagined by de Quincey as the seat of vast empires that overpowers the sense of youth in the individual, then a similar view of Asia as a land of boundless opportunity and untold wealth could be read of the pages of other modern European writers whose framing of Asia (and Asians) conformed to the logic of racialized colonial-capitalism as it developed during the era of the militarized colonial companies. Confining ourselves here to scholarship on Southeast Asia, we can see that in the works of men like Johan Nieuhof (1682)²⁰, Wouter Schouten (1708)²¹, John Stockdale (1812)²², Stamford Raffles (1817)²³, John Crawfurd (1829, 1830)²⁴, John Anderson (1826)²⁵, etc. Asia was not simply any nominal construct, but one that was imbued with meaning and value.

The most important difference that we need to take note of, however, is that by the time we get to the late 18th- 19th centuries, Europe’s understanding and framing of Asia was no longer couched in a discourse that was rooted in Western mythology, theology or metaphysics, but rather a modern, rational, scientific (and often also pseudo-scientific) and instrumentalist discourse that found its home in the very real structures of colonial-capitalism and colonial power. The 19th century framing of Asia was a modern one, where all the tools and discourses of modernity were in attendance, ranging from pseudo-scientific theories of racial difference to a thoroughly modern mindset that set out to arrange the world (soon to be colonized almost entirely) according to typologies and violent hierarchies that made sense and were meaningful to those who worked within the belly of the colonial enterprise.

The modern turn in Europe occasioned the secularization of Western society and the Western worldview as well; and as Europe’s power expanded globally so was this push towards desacralisation extended worldwide. By the 19th century the religiously-informed worldview of the likes of de Bry and Raleigh were long forgotten, and with that went the sacred geographies and cosmologies of both the West and Asia: The modern colonial-companies of Britain, Holland and France were less concerned about the

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 95.

²⁰ Johan Nieuhof, *Zee- en Lant-Reise door verscheide Gewesten van Oostindien, behelzende veele zeldzaame en wonderlijke voorvallen en geschiedenissen. Beneffens een beschrijving van lantschappen, dieren, gewassen, draghten, zeden en godsdienst der inwoonders: En inzonderheit een wijloopig verhael der Stad Batavia*. Amsterdam: de Weduwe van Jacob van Meurs, 1682.

²¹ Wouter Schouten, *Voiage de Gautier Schouten aux Indes orientales, Commencé l’An 1658. & fini l’An 1665. Où l’on void plusieurs Descriptions de Païs, Roiaumes, Isles & Villes, Sièges, Combats sur terre & sur mer, Coutumes, Manières, Religions de divers Peuples, Animaux, Plantes, Fruits, & autres Curiositez naturelles*. Pierre Mortier, Paris, 1708. The work was later republished in several editions, such as Wouter Schouten, *Reys – Togten naar en door Oost-Indien*, Amsterdam: Gerrit Tielenburg en Jan Tlam. 1740.

²² John Joseph Stockdale, *Sketches, Civil and Military, of the Island of Java and its immediate Dependencies, comprising interesting details of Batavia and authentic particulars of the celebrated Poison-Tree*. London: Printed for the author, Pall Mall. 1812.

²³ Thomas Stamford Raffles, ‘Regulations of 1814 For the More Effectual Administration of Justice in the Provincial Courts of Java’, appended in: *The History of Java*, London: Black, Parbury and Allen, publishers for the Honorable East India Company, Leadenhall Street; and John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1817.

²⁴ John Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Court of Ava*. London: Henry Colburn. 1829; and John Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin-China*. London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley. 1830.

²⁵ John Anderson, *Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra In MDCCCXXIII, under the direction of the Government of Prince of Wales Island*. London: William Blackwood, Edinburgh, and T. Cadell Strand. 1826.

location of Paradise and the garden of Eden, and more interested in coal deposits, paddy fields and rubber plantations. The understanding of land and nature, space and territoriality that emerged from the 19th century onwards changed how Asia was seen, and how space and the landscapes/seascapes of Asia were configured as well: Landscapes became territories to be occupied and commodified, and seascapes became vectors for maritime power-projection. Empire rendered the whole world a battlefield, and Asia became contested territory.

In the course of this transformation we are all familiar with the ways through which Asia and Asians were re-interpreted and redefined again, to meet the ends of militarized colonial-capitalism. Looking at the region of Southeast Asia, we can see that not only was Southeast Asia identified, located, placed and defined, but so were its constituent parts: Raffles (1817) framed Java and the Javanese as a land of antiquity trapped in a past that had to be conquered in order to be curated and brought into the order of Western historiography; Crawford (1829) had framed Burma and the Burmese as a land and people oppressed by Asiatic tyranny and who needed to be rescued by the forces of the British navy and the army of the East India Company; Anderson (1826) in turn presented Sumatra as a land of boundless natural wealth that could be liberated by colonial capitalism; while Borneo was seen and cast as the den of pirates and head-hunters, whose potential would only be realized after the arrival of the gunboat. In all these cases, Asia was known and made knowable; but through every act of knowing-naming, the Other was disabled as well.

That Asia was framed and defined is, in itself, not the core problem which deserves our attention; for if Asia is to be understood in any way it would undoubtedly be framed in one way or another. And though the definition and framing of Asia did involve the dialectics of identity-difference, and employed the use of typologies and violent hierarchies, I would argue that this needs to be understood in the context of East-West relations and differentials of power that were the norm in the colonial era.

My own concern here lies in the baser, simpler question of whether we – as scholars who work on Asia today – can ever situate ourselves outside a discursive economy where such modalities are at work, and how we – today – can try to reframe and rethink ‘Asia’ in a manner that avoids or lessens the violence that seems embedded in the act of knowing-naming. If we are to attempt such a thing, we should perhaps begin by accepting the fact that such a project is situated in the here-and-now of Modernity, and that we ourselves are trapped within, and defined by, the same logic of Modernity as well.

III. Our Post-Empire imperial epistemologies

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.²⁶

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,
The Danger of A Single Story

We all have to accept reality, yes, that’s true. But just to accept reality and do nothing else: that is the attitude of human beings who have lost the ability to develop and grow, because human beings also have the ability to create different realities.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer

I do not think that I need to apologise for being opposed to Empire, but I also do not think that we – as modern subjects – have been able to exceed the limits of Empire that easily either. On the contrary I do feel that we – again, as modern subjects – continue to live and labour under the long shadow of the 19th

²⁶ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of A Single Story*, TEDGlobal 2009, July 2009. Re: http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en

century, and in so many ways our worldviews, epistemologies and vocabularies today are also the worldviews and vocabularies that we have inherited from the recent past.

That the vocabularies and epistemologies of Modernity and colonialism continue to inform us, and continue to frame Asia and Asians in terms that are debilitating, can be seen everywhere: Their workings can be seen in our political economies, our statecraft, our modes of governance, and the ways through which we understand, present and re-present ourselves. Traces of this vocabulary are found all around us, from our tourist ads – where invariably Asia can only be presented in terms exotic – to our history books – where the postcolonial nation-state takes centre stage as the primary (and often only) actor on the stage of history, and our histories are invariably national histories cast and written in a distinctly Westphalian mould.

The problem seems to be the very vocabularies that we have inherited, and which happen to be the vocabularies that we use today in modern academic work. A cursory overview of the histories that have emerged in and across postcolonial Asia would show that in many ways we – scholars of Asia today – are still caught in what could be called an ‘imperial epistemology’ where the very words we use to describe, frame and name phenomena have had their meanings set since the 19th century. Consider, for example, the manner in which the postcolonial ‘official’ national histories of Asia have been written, and how they foreground the nation-state as the primary actor. The national histories of many postcolonial Asian countries have the tendency to backdate the presence of the postcolonial nation-state to a past when nation-states did not even exist; and as a result we have the history of Indonesia being backdated to the era of Majapahit and Srivijaya, and even earlier, despite the fact that it could be argued that those who built the temples of Prambanan and Borobudur did not toil away in the Javanese sun with the idea of the Indonesian Republic of the future as their goal.

And when describing political phenomena of the past to a present-day audience, it can be seen that the only vocabulary we have at our disposal is one where signifiers like ‘empire’, ‘hegemony’, ‘power’ etc. are already sedimented and defined in terms that were set by the 19th century. Postcolonial Asian historians write about the glorious past of great Asian civilisations and empires like the Cholas of India or the Ming of China, but in terms that strike me as surprisingly modern and contemporary. But if these were indeed ‘empires’ (as we understand ‘empires’ today), then pray tell – where are the fortresses, garrisons and barracks of these so-called ‘empires’ that had (supposedly) such hegemonic power over the rest of Asia? If the Chola ‘empire’ did indeed extend all the way to Southeast Asia as some historians suggest, then can we unearth concrete evidence of the kind of imperial mode of governance and power-projection that we would associate with, say, the Roman empire, or the British empire? (On the contrary, I would argue that signifiers like ‘empire’ are wholly inappropriate when we try to describe the socio-political-economic realities of Asia before its encounter with Western modernity, and to use such terms today would entail a flattening out, and homogenisation, of all kinds of socio-economic-political life in Asia that would conform to a particular Western historical model.)

I raise these points here not as an excuse to avoid speaking about Asian history or politics, and certainly not as an appeal to any kind of Asian ‘authenticity’ or difference couched in essentialist terms. Rather my concern is far more mundane and basic, and it lies in my deep disquiet that our very vocabulary may be a disabling one which does not capture the complexity of a premodern Asia as was mapped out in the work of scholars like Chaudhuri (1990)²⁷. But how else can we speak of Asia (and Asians) without recourse to a vocabulary that is replete with signifiers like ‘states’, ‘territory’, ‘sovereignty’, and so on?

Granted that we cannot simply step (radically) out of the discursive economy of modernity, we can still interrogate it from within and perhaps even try to upset some of forms of binary logic we see at work there. Living and working as we do in the poststructuralist era where we no longer regard texts as canonical and binding, and where the death of the author has already been proclaimed by Barthes, our own readings of the works on Asia written in the past can likewise be complex and nuanced. A text that

²⁷ K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Trade and Commerce in the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 1990.

comes to mind is Raffles' *The History of Java* (1817), which, as Bastin has noted, was even then regarded as a work of propaganda. But as I read that work today, I am less interested in Raffles' account of Java - for frankly I find very little of that - but more interested in the perspective of the author, which becomes blatantly, even painfully, clear at times. Raffles' *History of Java* is, for me, less a history of Java and more a history of himself, the company he served (The East India Company) and the country he belonged to. Less a history of Asia, that same work can, and perhaps should, be read as a history of the West and of western imperialism across Asia. It tells us more about the norms and values of the men of Empire, and of the workings of Empire's complex of power-knowledge that can be critically assessed and exposed along Foucauldian lines. By doing so, we do not eradicate or nullify the powerful dyads and binary logic that is at work in Raffles' writing, but we expose them for what they are: discursive strategies that were put to work in the project of creating a nominal construct called 'Java' (and 'Javaneseness').

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