

Inter-Asian Concepts for Mobile Societies

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This essay proposes that the study of Asia, thought of as an Inter-Asian space, can provide concepts that shed light on the social shapes of societies that are mobile, spatially expansive, and interactive with one other. Inter-Asia, an old world crisscrossed by interactions between parts that have known and recognized one another for centuries, provides an unmatched depth and breadth of mobile experience and material. Such material can be recognized if seen through concepts designed to bring out the shapes of mobile societies, and to analyze their dynamics. These concepts include mobility, disaggregation-reaggregation, connection, circulation, partial societies, transregional axis/intermediate scale, and outside-in analysis. They are offered in the spirit of philosophical housekeeping, to clarify and crystalize what is innovative about recent Asian studies that move beyond globalization, and to further those efforts. They are ways out of the box of classical social theory's internalist, constitutionalist paradigms that hamper the Inter-Asia venture.

Keywords: circulation, connection, disaggregation-reaggregation, Inter-Asia, intermediate, mobility, outside-in, partial societies, transregional

INTER-ASIA

WHILE GLOBALIZATION HAS PLAYED a salutary role in stimulating scholarship beyond local and national units of space, kicking anthropologists out of villages and historians out of nation-states, its ability to do so has reached certain limits.¹

To go beyond those limits, I propose that the study of Asia, thought of as an Inter-Asian space, and smaller than the whole globe, can provide tractable concepts for a new round of research to shed light on the social shapes of societies that are mobile, spatially expansive, and interactive with one other. In this sense, the notion that area studies receive theories and concepts but cannot generate them need not be true.

To promote an adjective to a noun, Inter-Asia, thought of not as a unitary continent but an old world crisscrossed by interactions between parts that have known and recognized one another for centuries, provides an unmatched depth and breadth of mobile experience and

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¹In space, those limits are the outer boundaries of the urban networks connected by the world market and industrial technologies pioneered and led by the modern West. In time, those boundaries include the past on land before the railway and telegraph, and on sea before steamships and chronometers.

material.² Such material can be recognized and used as data if seen through concepts designed to bring out the shapes of mobile societies, and to analyze the dynamics that form and transform them.

Such concepts can be crystalized and shed light on Inter-Asian material through a renewed collaboration between history and anthropology, each bringing to the joint effort their many ways of handling time and space. More diverse notions of time are needed to break the lockstep assumption, common under the sway of globalization, that spatial connectivity increases as time passes. Crudely put, the primitive is local, the modern global. Such an assumption restricts our understanding of mobile societies to those close to the highly marketized societies, techno-logistics, and cultural forms led by the modern West. While many Asian societies today have indeed been shaped by the modern West and reflect it, especially urban ones, there were and are many mobile societies that sustain relations across Asia beyond and before globalization's reach. Neither in art nor in literature, in religion nor in techniques, can Asia be said to be primitive. In this sense, Asia is a good place for starting to break the "local = past/global = present" lockstep of space and time assumed by globalization. This Asia, where the past is neither primitive nor local, is the world of Inter-Asian engagements, an old world that is more alive and vital than often suspected, that can disappear in one place only to reappear in another, that can recede into the past but reappear in a future time. In any case, my hunch is that the old, Inter-Asian world was suffused with such spatially broad and patterned engagements between mobile societies to a degree that we have forgotten and no longer know. Certainly, the wide spread of religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam), goods (cloth, ceramics, spices), epic literatures, mutual knowledge, languages, and genes speaks to wide-ranging interactions that were spatially broad and temporally sustained, rather than one-off migrations. Surely it is time to wipe the antiquarian and Orientalist dust and cobwebs off these items and bring them into the light of contemporary history, social sciences, and humanities scholarship. Were these marvelous things batted back and forth between separate societies, cultures, and civilizations or did they spread and find new homes on the backs of societies that were mobile and interactive, interlaced, interpenetrated, and intermarried with others?

New opportunities afforded by low-cost air travel and political openings across Asia have opened the eyes of people who journeyed across Asia in the recent decades of globalization, travelers who were surprised by seeing familiar things in foreign places, or old things from the past present in new places, or whose encounters in new places echo those experienced by their grandparents elsewhere. Old, mobile societies have pasts scattered and embedded across many places. Moving between them can feel like time travel, as each place activates a different layer of time or collective memory. The temporally flat lens of globalization in scholarship does not allow us to see such scenes of recognition

²Such a promotion may not be premature, after a decade of stimulating Inter-Asia conferences and meetings, as well as innovative transregional postdoctoral fellowships and workshops in a consortium led by the Social Science Research Council of New York (SSRC). The range of material is breathtaking, and innovative new works combine multiple genres of sources to capture distinctive phenomena dispersed across Inter-Asia (e.g., Ahmed 2016; Beemer 2013; Bernstein 2013; Bishara 2017; Chu 2010; Flood 2009; Kuo 2014; J. Mathew 2016; N. Mathew 2014; Moin 2012; Pickett 2015; Ratanapruck 2008; Thum 2014; Xiang 2007; Yolacan 2017; Zottoli 2011).

and attempts at reconnection, or acknowledge their intrigue. Ironically, air travel does. Many of us in academia, like others, encounter it while on vacation. Can the evanescent wonders of vacation have a place in the long-term pursuits of our scholarly vocation?

Equally so, but very differently, Tamil coolies in work gangs in the early twenty-first-century Persian Gulf construction sites or the early twentieth-century British Malayan plantations in the other direction may be caught in very similar shackles of debt indenture to relatives and brokers back home, obligations to save for sisters' dowries, and rational systems of reward and control. Are these opposite directions of labor migration in different centuries different instances of the same or related societies in motion? Indeed, the southern Indians who work in IT and venture to Singapore, and further out to Australia and California in hi-tech, mental-labor "body shops" have concerns over opportunity and obligation commensurable with those of their menial counterparts (Xiang 2007). What about Sindhi, Gujarati, and Malayali traders and clerks in the Persian Gulf, Swahili Coast, or Southeast Asia through the centuries?

In a different mode, South Asian soldiers, mercenaries, and lascars have worked with empires and states across the Indian Ocean for centuries, whether they be the Cholas who raided Southeast Asia in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, soldiers who protected Britain's colonies in Africa and Southeast Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Baluchi mercenaries who helped Gujarati princes in medieval days, Omani chiefs and Bania merchants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or Bahraini emirs today (Bhacker 1992; A. Ghosh 2001; Metcalf 2007; Sen 2003). Ameem Lutfi recently interviewed a Baluchi policeman in Bahrain who collects poetic ballads of folk-hero Baluchi mercenaries from medieval Gujarat and colonial East Africa, a diaspora of armed men ready to serve for a wage across continents and centuries, down to the present.³

Diasporas are one sort of mobile society that has become familiar in recent scholarship. They may be called mobile "societies" in the same way that Venetians and Genoese in Istanbul or English, Dutch, and Armenian diasporic communities or company-state traders in Surat were referred to as "nations," before the latter term became associated with ethno-cultural majorities endowed with sovereignty and entitled to their own states. Going back in time expands the semantic associations such words bring together. "*Dagang*" in Malay referred to a trader, traveler, or outsider without an ethnically understood diasporic identity. It never acquired one. States in the Malay Archipelago were often understood to be alliances of princes of varying provenance and trader-travelers, not political vessels fitted to ethno-majoritarian contents (Ho 2013). In the prototypical Malay state, the port-polity of Melaka, the four primary officials each represented a combination of merchant "nations" from different directions—Gujaratis, Tamils, and Persians in one; the eastern islands of the Bugis, Javanese, and others in another; Chinese and Ryukyu islanders in a third; and so on.

Whether we want to call these different mobile groups represented by officials at the Melaka court nations, societies, diasporas, ethnics, or traders changes according to scholarly fashion. What is significant is the patterned configuration of directions, circuits of mobilities, clusters of association in one place, election to office, marriage partners there and elsewhere, and so on. In modern, Western scholarship and culture, we

³Ameem Lutfi, personal communication with the author, Singapore, July 30, 2015.

would be quick to call something like the Melaka sultanate a plural society, and link that rather quickly with norms and values that valorize difference, multiculturalism, at times free trade, and so on. Our instinct is to sum up what the whole is, as a society, and what it should mean or value. Such a summary, integrative understanding of what the word “society” means is only a subset of what it could mean: all kinds of gatherings of people big, small, by choice or birth, a society of stamp collectors by free association, high society by snob appeal, human society as such.

THE INVENTION OF SOCIETY

In the English language, the word “society” retains that plasticity of shape, size, scale, and content. Nevertheless, its meaning today is predominantly that stamped by a whole tradition of social theory: the aggregate grouping that all other forms of human association fall within. Such a composite grouping has also become synonymous with states—French society, American society, etc.

The dominance of such aggregate notions of society, their rigidification in association with nations and states, and the theoretical investment that fills them up with structural content—classes, status groups, ethnicities, etc.—and defines what they are have created blinders that make it difficult for us to see the range and reach of mobile, small societies of the sort that crisscross Asia and have done so for centuries. While the critique of methodological nationalism has taken us a fair distance, it is not the case that the nation-state somehow put blinders on us, and that we somehow then took off the blinders, when something called globalization came along. The problem runs deeper than that.

We work in an Enlightenment tradition of Western social theory that has been obsessed with an internalist and constitutionalist view of what society is. That tradition early on sought to expunge the external from theory, in order to create a society for a state, and vice versa. Think of your classic triumvirate: Marx, Weber, Durkheim. For Marx, the structure of a society was defined by relations between classes, for Weber it was status, and for Durkheim it was mechanical or organic solidarity. More recently, postwar American social scientists came to see societies as being composed of fissiparous ethnic groups, within a single plural society. Foucault’s microphysics of power mobilized an undisciplined population for a national state. Habermas’s public sphere subsisted on national languages, separately for the English, the French, and the Germans, and so on.

Those smaller, mobile, less integrative societies have become difficult to see because the notion of society that has been created by Enlightenment theory focuses on the internal constitution of large, encompassing aggregates. Such aggregates banish the external and the outside to a realm beyond the pale, outside of the core understanding of society. What we are looking at here is not methodological nationalism, a nineteenth-century invention made into a limiting framework for historians. The trap is not the nation, but society. Society is a fundamental concept that has universal pretensions and claims: all human beings live in societies. Social scientists then argue about the internal structure and dynamics of such societies: are they composed of classes, in struggle with each other; when one wins decisively, is the whole society fundamentally transformed, a la Marx? Are they composed of congenitally different ethnic groups, who have to learn and share virtues of tolerance, such that they will not tear each other apart, as is their

primordialist wont? Who otherwise need to be coerced into peace by a leviathan larger than them all? Or is gender the fundamental category, cutting across all others, as pervasive as it is subtle?

These constitutional questions are, in turn, often inseparable from normative claims. The theorizing of democratic rule in the universities creates measuring sticks by which Western powers gauge the degree to which other states are adequate or legitimate in the way they internally constitute their societies. In the extreme, nondemocratic regimes may be overthrown by Western powers in the name of their own oppressed peoples. The internal constitutional work of social theory—and the liberal impulse that motivates a lot of that work—can shade quite quickly into aggressive, expansive foreign action.

Abolition is the preeminent example of this uncanny collusion between liberal theory and imperial expansion. Once a metropolitan consensus had been achieved on slavery by 1833, a 180-degree turn against what they themselves had done in the West Indies, the English state was only too happy to wield anti-slavery as a cudgel with which to do regime change in the East Indies in the nineteenth century. Slavery was held up as the key test for the internal constitution of native states, whether they practiced the ultimate gross inequality, to see if they should be dissolved or allowed to remain. The Muslim veil, Hindu widow burning, Chinese bound feet, and other tests were to follow suit, the unequally gendered constitution of native societies providing a moral wedge for Western intervention across Asia west to east.

Abolition was not only an excuse for regime change. Rather, abolition was part of a wholesale re-envisioning of how a state and a society could be reconfigured on moral grounds and made fitter for the creation of both wealth *and* war-making capacity. That reconfiguration also created the substantive theoretical frame for a powerful internal, constitutionalist sociology that has kept us thinking along national lines and banished the external. A key proponent of this theoretical frame was Adam Smith ([1776] 1982), who pitched it as an alternative to the mercantilist system that kept America colonized in thrall of the English. Colonialism was an international economy in which capital from England, slave labor from Africa, and land in America were combined to produce wealth. Because it was monopolistic, this international economy had to be kept together by violent force: the navy, plantation supervisors with whips, and so on. Mercantilism subordinated the economy to the state, to serve and suit its purposes. This unfree economy of monopoly kept prices high and output low.

Smith's solution to this violent, immoral, unfree, and international economy of slavery, colonialism, and monopoly was to shrink it to England's own borders. Smith argued that English capital, employing English labor on English land—an economy domestic and free rather than international and monopolized—could produce more wealth than all the plantations of America. A world-beating English workshop could export enough goods to generate a trade surplus and thus accumulate the gold needed to fight the state's foreign wars, without need of slaves or colonies. These three factors of production, land, and labor and capital, previously disaggregated and mobile, were now repatriated to England and reagggregated there, generating the wealth of the nation—the rent, wages, and profits that would give rise to the three great classes of society: landlords, workers, and capitalists. Smith's solution turned an international

economy into an internal one, restricting its mobility drastically, to create a national economy and a moral society for a world-beating state.

In Smith's theoretical architecture is found a whole economics and a whole sociology that would keep social theorists busy for the next few centuries. Can class societies change? Smith thought that being mere rent collectors, landlords were fungible, making a two-class society theoretically possible. Marx went one step further, to say the capitalists too were fungible, paring Smith's tripartite structure of society down to only one class. All value derived from labor.

What is relevant to us here is that this whole discussion could now take place rigorously within the box paradigm of a national state that could contain a whole, world-beating economy, class structure, and moral organization of society. Smith gave a powerful argument for forgetting about the external, the international, and the transregional, and in its stead, for staying home and perfecting the national industrial workshop to the world. Strange as it sounds, this English workshop model was the development model the postcolonial world grew up on, trumpeted by both national elites and international institutions.

Two consequences flow from Smith's refocusing of social theory from the international/external to the national/internal sphere. First, it set the standard for an integrative sociological ambition, one that could tie economics to social classes to politics to education to moral behavior, creating a rich field and analytical power. Second, however, it impoverished social theorizing on the external, international side. The Enlightenment tradition of social theory, and the twentieth-century social sciences that developed it further, came to mirror this theoretical asymmetry between the internal and the external. This imbalance is evident terminology. Terms for the external have been transient and unstable—global, transnational, international, translocal, multi-sited, imperial, colonial—whereas those naming the internal have in contrast been very stable: society, culture, community, nation, state.

This asymmetry in our conceptual stock-in-trade presents us with a dilemma. As we now look to the external, the transregional, and the expansive spatial connections, can we do so without jettisoning the integrative ambition and power of classic social theory? After all, this synthetic quality, the *sui generis* nature of society, as Durkheim put it, is what keeps at bay the reductionists who would dissolve society in the scientific acid of individual interest, genetics, pheromones, and so on. It has been said that culture is like butter—the more you spread it around, the thinner it gets. What would a thick transregionalism, a spatially expansive yet integrative account of a mobile society, look like?

BREAKING OUT OF THE BOX

In the dramatic turn scholarship has taken in the past two decades, breaking out of Smith's national box, this question has not been really asked. In the enthusiasm for globalization, scholarly practice surged ahead of theory. We threw the baby out with the bathwater. Under the sign of globalization, social scientists greatly expanded the spatial scope of their studies. Anthropologists did not so much critique the local village as abandon it for the wider pastures of the global. Instead of focused, long-term residence in a small place, anthropologists started going for multiple sites and shorter periods at each.

Instead of experiencing the whole social round in one small place for the obligatory year of fieldwork, composing a synthetic picture of society in its many dimensions, anthropologists went for a thinner slice of society spread over multiple sites. Globalization meant that societies and cultures the world over were changing. They were increasingly interconnected, for reasons of trade, technology, and neoliberal ideology. Appadurai (1990) called those slices “-scapes”—ethno, finance, media, etc.—providing useful vocabulary for following dimensions of society out into the globe. But tellingly, how these dimensions might be related to one another, or not, was not theorized. Elaborate disputes over the internal social dynamics of dialectics, articulation, relative autonomy, and determination (in the last instance!) no longer mattered.

Scholars had to break out of the box of nations because others were already doing it in a big way. Smith’s factors of production were once again being disaggregated and set mobile, mixing and matching capital and labor among different lands. Across Asia, factories began sending parts to one another, creating supply chains that spanned the continent (Yeung 2016). This was a change from a Wallersteinian scheme of peripheries sending raw material to Western metropolises. Along a revitalized “South-South” axis, Asians were trading with each other again, as manufacturers even. Intra-Asian trade surpassed trade with other regions in the first decade of the new century; Inter-Asian relations became dramatically visible. A little ahead of his time, Andre Gunder Frank (1998) celebrated this as the return of China as the manufacturing center of gravity of the world, after a mere 500-year blip of Western dominance. With the end of the Cold War, people were freer to travel; Open Skies deregulation furnished the cheap air tickets that allowed them to do so (Hedlund 1994). Thus petty traders were able to make money arbitraging between wholesale markets in Dubai and consumers in Russia, Central Asia, and Africa. Legions of workers—maids, laborers, technicians, engineers, bankers—moved to work overseas. The United States; Western Europe; and the richer countries of East, West, and Southeast Asia were the destinations. Ethnic enclaves sprouted or were rejuvenated in major cities, recalling the eras of empires and emporia. And of course, media waves carried pop and movie stars from Hong Kong and Taiwan to the Chinese mainland, and Korean ones to the rest of the world (Yang 2008).⁴

Earlier critiques of linear teleologies of progress were nonchalantly tossed aside, as the world seemed hooked onto an accelerated timeline of more, faster, cheaper—the condition of postmodernity (Harvey 1989). For social scientists, the spatially expansive and brave new world of the past three decades was largely a function of the present moment, that of globalization.

In their turn, historians discovered in the nineteenth century an earlier period of globalization, characterized also by increased connections and free trade, a world being compressed by an expanding web of steamships, telegraphs, and other infrastructures of modernity (Bayly 2003). Historians of empire were among the first out the gate, now at the front rank of the new global history. It used to be said that those who could not do one country properly went into world history. With the widespread acceptance of global history, the tide has turned. Historians are now going ever further back in time to rediscover the presence of the global then.

⁴For a masterful summary of these developments and what they mean for thinking of Asia as a region, again, see Duara’s “Asia Redux” (2010), which appeared in the pages of this journal.

The greater acceptance that good work can be done on a larger spatial scale has been salutary for scholarship. It has provoked new enquiries among some, and inspired others to go back to old materials. That work remains unfinished, however, and remains constrained within the limits set by globalization, as I have discussed: (1) the linking of spatial expansion to the linear progress of modern time; (2) the conceptual vocabulary of a marketized, technological society led by the West; (3) the blinders this creates toward recognizing mobile societies from an earlier period or contemporary ones at a remove from globalization's urban-transport-communications-industrial infrastructure; and (4) the neglect of classic social theory's integrative ambitions.

Strange to say, these issues ring familiar. Disaffection with familiar, modern, Western society has pushed generations of historians and anthropologists, imbued with a dash of romance perhaps, to study foreign countries in the past or abroad, for models of holism. To escape the limits imposed by globalization, let us start again, as it were, not with the individual countries or societies, but the people moving between them, the mobile societies we now call diasporas.

MOVING ACROSS INTER-ASIAN SPACE

Broadly speaking, there have been two major approaches to the study of people moving. The contrasts between them are instructive. Movements of people from the old world to the Americas were a major concern of migration studies. These were historical events that changed the world, that indeed brought forth new worlds. The numbers were large. Tens of millions moved from Europe to the cooler temperate zones of North and South America. Millions more moved from Africa and Asia to the warmer tropical zones. They went poor, looking for opportunities, or were brought by force. They integrated or assimilated into new societies. The Social Science Research Council of New York was formed initially to study how migrants could be integrated into the United States. Important schools of sociology, such as the Park School at the University of Chicago, were known for the subject. Integration, assimilation, or accommodation—migration studies fed into the internal-constitutionalist frames of classic social theory very neatly, giving it new problems to study without transforming the basic paradigm premised on a sharp separation between external and internal, and focused clearly on the latter. Theoretical questions revolved around each end of the migration path, the push-pull factors in the sending and receiving societies, and integration into the latter. They were followed by studies of other vectors of migration, of Chinese and Indians as laborers into British colonies, and their incorporation into the new nations upon independence. Again, numbers were large, one-way movements predominated, and internal frameworks prevailed. The journey did not matter.

Diaspora was a different affair. For the longest time, the term referred mainly to Jews, and was capitalized. The anthropologist Abner Cohen (1971), a Baghdadi Jew who grew up in Israel, introduced the term “trading diasporas,” studying mobile African traders who constituted their own ethnic groups and were foreigners in many places across Africa. The historian Philip Curtin (1984) extended the cases and communities to present an innovative vision of “cross-cultural trade in world history.” The journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, founded in 1990 and funded by the

Armenian Zoryan Institute, popularized the term in academia. While dedicated to the “history, culture, social structure, politics, and economics” of the “traditional diasporas” of Armenians, Greeks, and Jews, it extended the term to a whole host of other mobile peoples. A series of articles by Tölölyan (1996), Safran (1991), Rouse (1991), and Vertovec (1997) on “stateless power,” “myths of homeland and return,” and so on described mobile peoples who were not the typical subjects of migration studies, but Armenians, Jews, and Greeks who moved under their own steam in the old world. They had long histories of residence in many countries, were thought of as minorities and outsiders, and at times became victims of genocide and eviction. The numbers were small; their movements were not one-way migrations into new societies, but rather “traditional” and longstanding. Other studies of Malays, Chinese, and Mexicans, as diasporas, followed in the journal.

The entry of these old diasporas into the new world through this journal, at a moment when the “transnational” met with domestic US identity politics and the cultural rights movements in the 1990s, made diaspora a globalization of the ghetto. By clamoring for recognition in an American polity that ought to be multicultural, such notions of diaspora ironically played a role in disembedding them from deep historical and social relations with others in the old world. In a way the Owl of Minerva had taken off at dusk, as the Zoryan Institute was also dedicated to studying genocides. Armenian-Americans whose families had not lived in Armenia since the sixteenth century were now concerned with the homeland (Tölölyan 1996). The in-between centuries of residence in Turkey and elsewhere in the old world (Aslanian 2011) were no longer viable, or too laden with memories of tragedy to rehash.

Thus diaspora studies as it evolved in the United States in the 1990s developed a bipolar frame, of old world home and US host. The success of lobbies in the United States, especially after the 1967 and 1973 war victories and the toleration of dual citizenship, in both the United States and Israel, underlined the unusual possibility of binational diasporas (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007; Shain 1999; T. Smith 2000). The Jewish diaspora became a model for emulation by many immigrant groups in the United States, for whom assimilation into the melting pot was no longer the dominant model prescribed (Glazer and Moynihan 1970). They could retain homeland identifications and passports, and be genuine American citizens as well, in a multicultural US polity. Indians, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and a host of others in the United States began to understand themselves as diaspories, and the literature in scholarship flourished.

Along the way to such a dual understanding of diaspora, something happened to the other historical homes of diaspora, the third spaces across the Middle East, Europe, and Asia where Jews and Armenians had resided. They disappeared from the view of diasporic theorists, to be resuscitated as an abstract “transnationalism” that was now celebrated as the global condition. At the hands of brilliant cultural theorists such as the Parsi Homi Bhabha, this condition of an abstract third space gained a respectable lineage, sourced from a space of hybrids and marginals between colonial and native societies in India, now come into their own to show the way forward for an America that was no longer a monolingual melting pot, but a multicultural haven.

I discuss migration and diaspora in some detail because they are useful entry points into mobile societies in the old Inter-Asian world. The many studies that have been conducted on them present us with a set of concepts that is useful for developing in a deliberate manner the external dimensions neglected by classic social theory. At the same time

however, some of the dazzling upper harmonic registers of Indo-American postcolonial cultural theory, developed in the moment of globalization's triumph, may lead us astray. Ideas of hybridity, mimicry, and the third space are a case in point (Bhabha 2004). They are formulated in the context of colonizer/colonized encounters across the high racial bars and power inequalities of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial India, but at close Anglophone quarters. They pry open spaces of reversal and resistance within evanescent moments of enunciation. But such late-colonial encounters and their virtuoso performances are very different from the humdrum sorts found in comparable Inter-Asian diasporic encounters.

Hybridity and third spaces appear very differently if we take examples from the pre-colonial and colonial Malay Archipelago, where the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, and Pacific Ocean meet. There, mobile societies from across Asia have engaged one another on a continuing basis for centuries. Across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, maritime diasporas from the southern coasts of Arabia, India, and China have circulated with the annual monsoon winds. Unlike massive, stochastic, and one-way late-colonial migrations to plantations, the numbers were small but continuous. And with the alternating winds, they went back and forth between the archipelago and these regions that were adjacent by sea. For the most part men traveled, and in port-cities where they repeatedly appeared, "third" communities of creoles, descendants of unions between the mobile men and local women called *peranakan*, appeared. This was true of the Arab, Indian, and Chinese diasporas, and on the coasts of Africa and India, similar communities of creoles stabilized, known respectively as Swahilis and Mappilas. When the Portuguese, Dutch, and English entered this maritime world, mostly as men prior to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they too developed communities of creole descendants, known variously as burgers, *blijvers*, *peranakan*, Eurasians, and so on. Before the advent of heightened racial bars in the nineteenth century, mobile Europeans participated in patterns of commensality, seasonal unions, business partnerships, and moral bonds with local affines, and so on. Whether Arab or Bugis (Ho 2002; Mandal, forthcoming), Indian (D. Ghosh 2006), or Chinese (Skinner 1996), the hybrid offspring of such unions could go on to become rajas and sultans of local polities; high court officials; leading merchants; and, in the Dutch cases, governors-general of Dutch colonies across Asia (Taylor 1983).

The hybrid was not necessarily disempowered or marginal, but in fact could be leading establishment figures, even conservative ones, who gave orders to young, white employees fresh from Europe, and married their creole daughters to the most promising of them. The same was true in diasporic Arab, Indian, and Chinese circles. In such creole families, valuables such as houses and lands, and values such as lineage identification, came to be passed down female lines. While men circulated along with exchange goods ocean-wide, women accumulated values and valuables at nodal points. Young men fresh off the boat, whether Dutch, Arab, Chinese, or Bugis, could accelerate their careers if they were lucky enough to contract unions with the women who could provide them access to the rich, powerful networks, linked by women, that controlled the values and valuables. Such patterns of kinship and affinity, known in anthropological jargon as matriliney, uxoriality, matrifocality, and so on, emerged in coastal East Africa (Donley 1982), the southern coasts of Arabia and India (Gough 1954; Ho 2006), and the eastern one of Sumatra (Hadler 2008). Concerned with cultural wholes understood locally, anthropologists have studied these communities separately as making arbitrary

cultural choices valorizing females within a universal continuum of logical possibilities (Schneider and Gough 1961), but not seen them together as a larger whole, as partial communities connected to each other across an ocean-wide circulation of mobile societies (R. Smith 1996).

These historical oceanic examples are convenient because they have been most easily discerned by scholars, and developed in scholarship. They are also where continuities, variations, and revitalizations in the age of globalization are most readily seen. Across the centuries, cities in nodal areas that sit between oceanic regions have taken turns at leading their peers and rivals. Dubai today has supplanted rivals Aden, Mocha, Djibouti, and Hormuz on the corners of the Arabian peninsula; Bombay outshines Surat, Diu, Daman, Baruch, Porbandar, and Calicut on India's west coast; while Singapore is the current avatar of earlier emporia clustered around the Strait of Melaka: Aceh, Johor-Riau, and Melaka itself. On the South China coast, Canton is coming into its own again after a temporary defeat by Hong Kong, as is Shanghai further up the coast. While Xiamen, Quanzhou, Wenzhou, and Ningbo have not quite regained their earlier glories as destinations, their own populations now venture out again to engage the world that used to sail to their doorsteps. In each of these contemporary emporia of a presumably globalized world, the mix of diasporic traders from adjacent regions who now throng its markets (e.g., Africans, Iranians, and Indians—and now Russians and Chinese too—in Dubai; Arabs, Indians, Indonesians, and Chinese in Singapore; and Africans, Arabs, Indians, and Southeast Asians in Canton) would not be unfamiliar to the medieval travelers who journeyed through them or their predecessors, such as Ibn Battuta, Ibn Majid, Tome Pires, Marco Polo, and Ma Huan (Ali 2011; Binsal 2016; Bredeloup 2012; Khalifa 2006; Zhang 2008). While they may be dubbed global cities by Saskia Sassen (1991) and house legions of Anglo-American lawyers and accountants from the leading transnational firms, they continue to provide value to and draw wealth from the adjacent regions that they bring together as transregional hubs.

While the mobile societies of Inter-Asian connections are most readily seen around the flat, readily traversed spaces of ocean basins, it is not true that mountains are harder for them to cross. As hideouts of bandits, rebels, smugglers, and drug lords, mountains have always appealed to Western romantics as spaces of freedom and alterity. States cannot climb mountains, as James Scott (2009) says, and we should add that the infrastructures of globalization do not like to as well. Yet the highland space of Zomia that he theorizes as a black hole in a world otherwise suffused by states is demonstrably an organized landscape of mobile, state-like monastic orders (Chatterjee 2014) and genealogically organized routes and resthouses of mobile Muslim community-orders (Ma 2013). The examples can be repeated for other mountain regions, which can be viewed as connective bridges between regions rather than isolated impasses (Fewkes 2009; Marsden 2016; Ratanapruck 2007; Thum 2014; Yolacan 2017). These networks remain obscure if one is used to looking for steamships, trains, telegraphs, motor cars, paved roads, and other infrastructures of modern globalization. But they come into view if one pays attention to native genealogies, letters of merchants, and temple and tomb networks, and is prepared to walk and climb on foot.

If we take these capsule sketches as examples of Inter-Asian connections, of the old world and the early-colonial world, we can draw from them concepts that I believe can be of use to elucidate other cases of mobile societies interacting with each other, whether in

the contemporary moment of globalization or in a possible successor period of contraction.

These concepts help us fill up again the external space evacuated by Adam Smith in his repudiation of the “Old Colonial System.” They are most easily seen if we too look past the old colonial system, not of America but of Asia, to review the mobile societies of an old, Inter-Asian world. But I suggest that their use need not be restricted to such a world. Rather, they may be of generic use in recognizing and understanding mobile societies, and creating socially thick descriptions of their shapes and dynamics before, during, and after globalization.⁵

Mobility

Mobility is not so much a concept as a method for moving outside the internalist box of classic social theory. In the Inter-Asian examples above, it is clear that no locale or community is an isolate: frogs around a pond, as Braudel would say for Mediterranean ones. Another way to put it is that the economy is larger than the polity. In Aristotle’s economics, the science of managing households, providing for one includes raiding and warfare, and trade involves exchange for things not available locally. For a start, mobility as method has added to analysis whole categories of empirical phenomena that fell out of view before. This is probably the single most significant and dramatic development we have seen.

In the large, territorially understood countries of Asian studies, India and China, it is no surprise that maritime scholars have been among the earliest to adopt mobile methods. In South Asia, they have not restricted themselves to the subcontinent, but claimed the Indian Ocean as their preserve (Bose 2006; Chaudhuri 1985; Das Gupta 1979; Subrahmanyam 1993). While they have constituted a somewhat separate line of inquiry from a much larger number working on territorial India, their wide-ranging spatial approach has been used to good effect across the subcontinent as well.

Lakshmi Subramanian’s (1987) reinterpretation of how the British were able to defeat the Marathas on the west coast of India, the final step to full subcontinental control, is a case in point. She argues for the existence of expansive financial networks (nominal counterparts to transregional exchanges of goods) run by Banias that cover the subcontinent, as they do across the western Indian Ocean (Bishara 2017), that enabled the British to remit land revenues they collected in Bengal as agents of local potentates to fund agile military operations on the other side of the subcontinent. In other words, the mobile military strategies of the British were enabled by and counterparty to mobile financial networks of Indian Banias. This gives new meaning to the old bon mot, “every Englishman has his bania.” Instead of a black-and-white view of conquest of India by English foreigners, Subramanian’s account reformulates early colonial India as an alliance, the Anglo-Bania order. Beneath a conventional history of events, of battles and kings on the west coast of India, lay a whole network of mobile exchanges that covered the land and sea on either side of that coast. Such networks preceded colonialism, and outlasted them.

⁵A new generation of legal historians—including Fahad Bishara, Rohit De, Iza Hussin, Riyad Koya, Renisa Mawani, Julia Stephens, and Nurfadzilah Yahaya—is rewriting Indian Ocean history. For a review of how their work exemplifies thick transregional analysis of mobile societies, in terms of the concepts presented here, see Ho (2014).

Disaggregation-Reaggregation

Mobility as a method becomes very flexible and productive when we combine it with the concept of disaggregation-reaggregation. When we unpack and disaggregate the national economy-society put together by Adam Smith, we can see it clearly as a contraction from an international economy, where the factors of land, labor, and capital were separately set in motion—farms transplanted from the subtropics, people from Africa, and capital from England—all to be reaggregated on American plantations. Smith's theoretical achievement involved understanding that the factors were mobile, to disaggregate them from their American configuration, and making the case for reaggregating them on English soil. Doing so had consequences for how he thought about another fundamental mobile factor of wealth production: protection. A national economy would not need a monstrous imperial state to protect all those factors moving across the Atlantic Ocean, some under coercion.

When we disaggregate trade from its protection, and follow their mobilities separately, we are able to identify an important contrast: the European trading companies brought along their own protection, by putting guns on ships, whereas the established pattern of Inter-Asian trade was to have merchants buy protection from local potentates, paying customs taxes where their goods came to shore. Whether protection traveled with trade or not had profound consequences for shaping Inter-Asian space and history (Steensgaard 1973). Where protection was locally sourced rather than mobile, traveling merchants became partners of rulers of port-states (like Arab Muslims in the Hindu court of Calicut); in some places they became local officials (like the Melaka court officials above, Persian foreign ministers at the Thai court, and Arab ones at Malay courts) and even kings, as did Chinese in Thailand, and Arabs, Bugis, and Englishmen in the Malay archipelago. Not bringing their own protection meant that mobile societies across the Inter-Asian oceans became parts of other societies, articulating with them in a range of ways such as in these examples. In contrast, by bringing their own protection, European companies did not integrate with local potentates to the same degree, nor enter into moral relations with their populations. Analyzing how trade and protection were mobile together or separately provides one conceptual means of describing the range of ways in which mobile societies articulated, intercalated, and integrated across Inter-Asian space, or instead transplanted their own states to develop foreign colonies abroad (Ho 2004).

Connections

Euclidian geometry begins with a point. A succession of points creates a line. In a similar way, when things move, connections can be made between different places. Once made, connections can be cultivated, thickened, used, abused, bound, or broken, and can reconnect yet again. Rarely do single lines represent them with any adequacy. So it is with histories of Inter-Asian connections, which can pass through all these different states. Certainly, connections between the South China coast and Southeast Asia have done so. There is an alternating quality to them, much of which has to do with governments' vacillating attitudes toward merchants and their trade at the ports: at times open and welcoming, at other times monopolizing and closing. The reach of the diasporic economy is larger than the grasp of the state polity, and governments' vacillation reflects their lack of ability and confidence to properly control the spatially larger and more

mobile diaspora. As one of the southern Chinese port inspectors put it succinctly: when trade is free, these people are merchants; when trade is unfree, they are pirates. Merchants and pirates were often the same people. The history of the port of Quanzhou in Fujian Province, known to the Arabs as Zaytun, illustrates this nicely.

Since the ninth century, Quanzhou has hosted large numbers of Muslim merchants from Arabia, Persia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Today its maritime museum houses hundreds of tombstones in Arabic and Persian, collected from the vicinity. Aromatics such as frankincense and gharu wood from southern Arabia and Southeast Asia at times amounted to 40 percent of the trade they brought in and were the high-priced incense and medicines of the day. At Quanzhou one could obtain products from Japan and Korea, to which the Quanzhou merchants were connected. Essentially, Quanzhou was the major transshipment center, which took in goods from across the Indian Ocean littoral and re-exported them north to distant centers (Clark 1991). Marco Polo thought it was the largest emporium in the world.

At the end of the ninth century, when Tang soldiers revolted and sacked cities in the region, these merchants decamped to the other foot, the Southeast Asian ports of Kedah and Palembang that traded with Quanzhou (Chau 2010; Hourani 1951). They subsequently returned and flourished in the Song period. Under the Mongol Yuans, when mobile Muslims were encouraged throughout China, Quanzhou and its transshipment trade developed further. When the Yuan lost to the Ming, they again decamped, many again to Southeast Asia. Some argue this was when Islam became established in the region, from the direction of China rather than Arabia (Chaffee 2008). With their departure, China essentially lost a large part of its trading arm to the Indian Ocean, and with the subsequent Ming voyages under the Muslim admiral Cheng Ho, flag followed in the footsteps of the trade diaspora, out into the Indian Ocean.

It can be said that the southern Chinese trade diaspora into Southeast Asia has been a mobile society without a political vessel along the axis of its connection across the South China Sea. It was thus the genius of the English to recognize that subtle fact, and to enter into partnership with them. Like the Anglo-Bania order, the Anglo-Chinese partnership seemed a readymade friendship, and it retraced the Quanzhou-Guangzhou-Palembang-Kedah line of connection in the other direction, now with a slight adjustment from Penang, Melaka, and Singapore and on up to Hong Kong and Amoy. The corridor flourished under British protection, but was again blocked with the descent of the Cold War chill after China went communist (Kuo 2014).

With China's opening in the 1980s, diasporic Chinese from Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore returned as pioneer investors, and continue to play critical roles in China's reentry into world markets (Tan 2010). Their companies, such as the Thai Charoen Pokphand (CP) conglomerate, brought their production machinery and export markets to greenfield special economic zones (SEZs), substituting Chinese labor for Thai. In doing so, they helped jumpstart the Chinese SEZs when Deng Xiaoping began his market reforms in the southern coastal regions from where they hailed. CP was the first foreign investor in the Shenzhen SEZ, with registration number 0001.⁶ Goh Keng

⁶I thank Kong Yam Tan for sharing his insights and knowledge on China's reentry into the world market.

Swee, the economic architect of Singapore, was an advisor in the creation of China's SEZs; the Director-General of Investments of China's new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank today, tasked to fund its One Belt One Road initiative, was plucked from Singapore's public housing, infrastructure, and industrial park consultant group Surbana—its CEO Pang Yee Ean. Indeed Singapore, as a major world transshipment center, can be thought of as a Quanzhou relocated further southwest, down the old corridor. Pushing past the South China Sea into the Pacific, the Anglo-Chinese partnership continues to flourish in Australia, Canada, and California, as extensions of the southern Chinese diaspora.

Mobile societies make and remake connections, and a rigorous spatial focus combined with a plastic sense of time allows them to emerge into view. While connective histories are now becoming of interest, in addition to the erstwhile comparative ones, Inter-Asian examples suggest that the challenges lie not only along the more obvious connected spatial lines, but the discontinuous yet discernible temporal ones as well.

Circulation

Travel takes time; long-distance travel takes even more time. When there is time, things become possible that would otherwise not be. With time, good things can be repeated. Good trades and relations can be maintained. Repetition creates stability, substance, habit, custom, expectations, and reality. Repetition over both dimensions of space and time creates what we call circulation. Circulation gives a substantive sociological alternative to notions of structure, which connote fixity and perdurance of relations through time—all without the basic elements moving. The Enlightenment social theorists replaced the vertical hierarchies of divine rule with the horizontal patterns of circulation to create concepts of society that were flat and egalitarian, yet natural and necessary in their own right. Social circulations were like the circulation of blood, which was undeniably part of the force of life. Nature rather than divinity provided the analogical, conceptual grounding for this new thing called society. Adam Smith and the Physiocrats drew inspiration from Harvey's discovery of the blood system to model the flow of goods and moral sentiments (A. Smith [1759] 1984). Durkheim drew analogy from interdependence of body parts as an organic model for social solidarity. Natural law, properly understood, would provide the rules for interaction between society's members.

Not for its biological analogies, but for its regularization of mobility through space and time, circulation provides a useful lens for looking at Inter-Asian societies. Subrahmanyam, Markovits, and Pouchepadass (2003) have taken up the concept of circulation to study "mobile people and itinerant cultures" in South Asia, to write over earlier views of a static village India. In a different mode, Duara (2015) sounds a warning that our existing nation-states are inadequate to address important circulatory phenomena such as environmental problems.

Attention to circulatory processes, where they exist, helps us to establish the substantive reality of external connections. Research in Asia continuously uncovers circulations historically, and new ones ethnographically, as they continue to arise. Circulations of peoples across our transregional axes that straddle the South China Sea and Indian Ocean are thick and historically continuous. In the early-twentieth-century period of colonialism, one-way migrations swamped these circulations, but today, the circulations

are back, as migrant workers are denied long-term or permanent residence, and have to return home.

Partial Societies

When we work on a transregional or intermediate scale, we are in each location working with partial notions of society, rather than the synthetic and holistic ones of classic theory, or the fragmentary ones of postmodern cultural studies. The incompleteness of each part makes us seek the ways in which it engages other parts at a distance. Port cities and colonies are typical locales of partial societies. Furnivall (1944) registered their partial nature, but misinterpreted it to imply attenuated interethnic relations in a plural society. While trade complementarities are the most obvious and historical examples, there are many others. Pilgrimages to special places at a distance is one. Filipino spouses for Japanese sons on a rural farm with few marriage opportunities is another. Within a local community, one may not have all the necessities for social reproduction (Suzuki 2003). Today, Tamil men work in Dubai to provide dowries for their sisters back home. Jane Guyer (2008) says that in a globalized world, every family needs a member working in a hard currency country. The durable goods of the industrialized consumer everywhere are costed in such coin. Minorities locked out of universities in Malaysia go abroad in large numbers, while Middle Eastern students who cannot enter or afford the United Kingdom or United States in their turn flock to tertiary institutions there.

Transregional Axis, Intermediate Scale

Scholars working on Inter-Asian connections are spared the vaunting ambition of going global, on the one hand, and being trapped by the local, on the other. In following peoples, movements, goods, and other things, scholars often find themselves retracing links between adjacent regions, and come up with studies we can call transregional. In schematic terms, the transregional is an intermediate level, neither local nor global. Phenomena at this level do not come into view under a localist or national lens. They also disappear in the abstractions of globalism. Yet it is at this level that the richest veins of Inter-Asian material and experience are found.

Within territorial China, Skinner (1985) has a scheme that defines historical macroeconomic regions, and a transregional axis would be one that connects them. Subramanian's (1987) Bania financial network across India would be another. On the water, Chaudhuri's (1985) triple segmentation deriving from the alternation of the monsoons is useful: South China to the Straits of Melaka, to Malabar and Gujarat, to the Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Aden. These can be visualized as the western and eastern Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea. These axes of connection have in the past been most familiar to historians of long-distance trade. More recently they have been thickened with the movements of diasporas, religious networks, labor migrations, literary exchanges, and others. Today the routes of cheap airlines such as Air Asia retrace their steps.

Research on this intermediate scale of transregional connections has developed vigorously in the past two decades, and is doing the work of thickening the external connections. Inspired by the work of one another on this transregional axis, scholars of trade, law, religion, diplomacy, colonialism, diaspora, migration, literature, and the environment are

tying together materials from different ends of the transregion by leaning on the work of scholars in other fields who have made the connections more firmly (Amrith 2013; Bishara 2017; Blackburn 2017; Green 2013; Ho 2006; Metcalf 2007; Ricci 2011; Sen 2003). This results in an intertwining of the different strands of scholarship and a thickening of the rope of connections, cumulatively. It is on this intermediate, transregional level that Inter-Asian studies are pioneering thick transregionalism. They have the data to do it, because traders, pilgrims, diplomats, officials, lascars, slaves, and servants sailed on the same ships driven by the same monsoons, arrived at the same ports, and left a variety of materials in their wake.

Outside-In Analysis

The concepts discussed above help focus and organize studies of mobile societies, in different scales, sizes, and temporalities. Properly done, such investigations will allow us to return to the conventional units, of countries and nation-states, in new ways, and even to inform major events in their modern histories, from the outside in.

It is striking, and unlikely a coincidence, that the “Father of the Nation” of each of India and China, Gandhi and Sun Yat-sen, came from major historical export regions and communities with extensive diasporic presences abroad, Gujarat and Guangdong. They spent much time abroad in the diaspora. Gandhi built his political reputation in over two decades in South Africa, and the story of Gujarat’s major industry and export, cloth, is inseparable from his political trajectory. The hinterland of Gujarat’s cloth production has stretched across the Indian Ocean for centuries, as has its mobile societies. Sun Yat-sen’s peregrinations were more wide-ranging, extending to Hawaii, Japan, an alliance with Filipino revolutionaries, and major financial and organizational support from Southeast Asian Chinese. The Pearl River Delta region, like Gujarat, has been China’s major export zone to the world for centuries, and over the past three decades has rebuilt this position. The Cantonese probably form China’s largest diasporic community across the world.

Sustained attention then, to the longstanding connections of Gujarat and Guangdong with other places far beyond their coasts, through mobile circulations across to adjacent regions and thinner ones further afield, can establish something like a social basis for understanding the historical events that mark the achievements of figures like Gandhi and Sun. The argument here is that the mobile spatial dimension, which straddles the internal and the external, contains diasporic powers that can be mobilized to shape the actions and events that transpire over time. Diasporas are no islands, and certainly can intertwine with other diasporas, such as those that come with their own states called empires (Ho 2004). The Anglo-Bania and Anglo-Chinese orders discussed earlier must have provided players, contexts, refuge, supporters, and traitors in the course of Gandhi’s and Sun’s struggles. Without a systematic understanding of the full dimensions of the external, of the entangled mobile societies that constitute it, and of how its potentials may be harnessed and brought to bear internally, one is missing half the story.

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