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Response to Responses

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The sharp, subtle, and rich responses of fellow panelists help clarify some of the issues I have been concerned with in this essay. A major one has been to foster and support research that brings to light the numerous relations, axes of interaction, and mobile societies that crisscross Asia and constitute what I am calling Inter-Asia. Over the past decade, my involvement in five Inter-Asia conferences and five rounds of Transregional Postdoctoral Fellowships organized by the Social Science Research Council of New York (SSRC) has demonstrated to me that such phenomena exist in far greater numbers than anyone had imagined at the outset. Those that were contemporary were more immediately visible and well represented at the conferences, while the historical examples tended to surface more in the fellowships. Ironically, fellows convened in workshops expressed delight at meeting fellow travelers in what many felt to be lonely enterprises, laboring along large scales. In practical terms, research over wide spaces, deep time and multiple languages requires more resources and forbearance than usual, and the SSRC's singular leadership in this department has been key. Within the confines of individual university departments, such projects often founder at the level of dissertation proposals, where committee members object to fishing expeditions that are "too big," especially for first timers. There, an ocean is not a good thing. The issue is not one of size or age, but conceptual control. This essay was an inquiry into why such phenomena are not easily perceived, and an attempt to gather linked concepts to help crystalize them in research, presentation, and theoretical cognition.

The Islamic interweaving of China and India that Rian Thum brings to light is a case in point. How did something this significant between such big regions go unnoticed in scholarship? Certainly, the assumption of a given China, to which Islam had to syncretize, played a part. The notion that Buddhism and Islam are separate religions also played its part, eliding the ways in which later Muslim shrines, waystations, and routes were built over preceding Buddhist ones. Geographical continuities provide clues to those in practice, consciousness, or time that may persist across the conventional divide between past and present. But a more mundane reason, that Sinologists read Chinese rather than Arabic-script languages, is persuasive as well. Starting outside-in through Arabic, Persian, and Turkic sources, Thum's interweaving of texts, traders, and difficult geographical routes outlines an innovative study that promises to be socially thick, transregional, and genuinely Inter-Asian. It has the potential to turn our views of China outside-in like a sock, to "disaggregate China into the tangle of interconnections that constitute it."

Jaeeun Kim's challenge to justify resubstantializing rather than desubstantializing mobile societies had me thinking for a while. Did the argument amount to a substantialist view? I suppose any attempt to reaggregate can be termed substantialist. But the point is that the object of research must be a product that emerges at the end of analysis, rather

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than pre-exist in a given form. The concepts floated in the essay are indeed so many ways to take apart any pre-existing object and shuffle things around; but also to put Humpty Dumpty back together again, in a different way.

The curve of Emily Teng's essay rethinking Eurasian families, beginning with a given racial concept or collective representation of hybridity shared by colonizer and colonized in one social field, but concluding with analytical ones of hub and web sutured to biographical detail, is drawn in the same spirit, I believe. Teng demonstrates how such concepts, if appropriate, can direct inquiry into areas beyond the compass of the original field conception or representation of Eurasian, yet return to shed new light on it. Conceptual control enables one to follow unusual leads and render the object of investigation in elaborate detail, while maintaining focus.

The essay was tilted toward historical rather than contemporary examples. Although the historical materials exist, their interconnections somehow seem harder to see, and this provided a challenge. Adding temporal dimensions also gives one more material to work with, at the cost of additional narrative difficulty. In this regard, Nicole Constable's essay provides a valuable counterpoint, focusing as she does on the fleeting, temporary, contemporary, and exceptional social formations and spaces. From a different angle, her transnational ethnographies illuminate at close quarters the Inter-Asian terrain I have tried to describe. She employs concepts such as class, status, race, and gender in partial ways, as lenses to see how they inflect social situations and practices, rather than as constitutive categories in the manner of classic social theory. My argument was targeted at how such concepts were used to constitute internalized wholes, willy-nilly shutting out the external and the mobile. In contrast, Constable uses them deftly and differently, such as examining how gender inflects mobility, in "Asian cross-border marriages and gendered labor migrations." Used in these ways, such concepts play well with ideas such as disaggregation and circulation. Filipino mothers may go abroad as maids while husbands stay home, pulling apart families, but at some point circulate back due to residence limits imposed on migrant labor. Such cycles of disaggregation, differential gender mobility, and reaggregation surely shape Filipino working families in patterned ways, and produce one sort of mobile, Inter-Asian society. The extent to which queer, mixed-passport, and cross-border families can circulate and consolidate their mobile lives, or not, says something about the extensive power and control conditions under which they live.

A point of difference lies perhaps in Constable's focus on discontinuities, while the essay tended to seek out continuities. It may be a matter of taste. But it may also take us back to the issue of resubstantialization. In our highly bordered and minutely divided world, discovering unsuspected connections with persons far away or long gone can generate pleasure and hope, as Amitav Ghosh's many readers can attest to. A copy of the *Asia Magazine*, which used to come free with the Sunday edition of the *Malay Mail* newspaper in racially divided Malaysia decades ago, once featured an article on Central Asia with breathtaking pictures. It opened with the line, "Go away to foreign countries, and there find your relatives." If the venture of Inter-Asia is driven more by curiosity and claustrophobia than theory, that might not be a bad thing.

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