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Response to Comments on "Asia Redux"

PRASENJIT DUARA

Over the last year, as I have presented this paper at various venues, I have received a range of responses. One of them is that this essay is less a disinterested study and more like advocacy. I have hastened to confirm that mine is a position of ethical advocacy, but not without an empirical basis. Objectivity, impartiality, and autonomy from political positions are important ideals in the academic profession, and I count myself among the more enthusiastic supporters of such values. At the same time, I am not so naive as to believe that scholars do not inescapably reflect the intellectual and political positions to be found in the world out there. It is vital to acknowledge this connection because, in doing so, we subject our position and judgment to the scrutiny of their basis in objectivity and accuracy.

What is to be scrutinized are the materials and case I am presenting for a reemergent Asia. My understanding of the material leads me to believe that some form of region making will continue to emerge. Where my personal ethics and preferences play a role lies in my advocacy of one direction among others that this development could take in the future.

Turning to the question of the ethical aims of such a project, Wang Hui's typically thoughtful considerations give us a good point of entry. Wang appears to be in fundamental agreement with my account, but he seeks to clarify the goals: how can this emergent Asia make a difference? His concluding summary puts it pithily, "the issue of Asia is not simply an Asian issue, but rather a matter of 'world history.'" Reconsidering "Asian history" is at once to reconstruct nineteenth-century European "world history," and an effort to break free of the twenty-first-century "new imperial" order and its associated logic. The critique of Eurocentrism, he argues, cannot be an affirmation of Asiacentrism, but rather an attempt to transform a logic dominated by "egocentrism, exclusivity, and expansionism." I endorse this vision and find it fully compatible with the thrust of my essay.

The regions of Eurasia (or what Tansen Sen calls Afro-Eurasia) have been tied together for more than a thousand years, and "changing gears" in one part of this world has complex consequences in many parts of the rest of it—whether in Asia or Europe. Jack Goody has recently made a persuasive argument that the Eurasian world has been deeply interconnected since the Bronze Age, and no major developments—for instance, the scientific or industrial

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revolution—can be seen in isolation from these long-term circulations. Rather than focus on radical change or revolution in one part of this world (whether in Western Europe or China), periods of accelerating change in any part of Eurasia have often rapidly affected many other parts. In *The Theft of History*, Goody argues that modern Western scholars have appropriated this common heritage as exclusively Western by a kind of epistemic violence that accompanied and even outlasted Western domination.[1]

In an effort to warn us against further demonization of Western imperialism, Tansen Sen urges us not to neglect violence and domination by historical Asian powers. I would be an utter fool to deny the violence of conquerors, empire builders, plunderers, and pirates. Worse still, any kind of celebratory Asianist essentialism would undo entirely what we have learned from the painstaking work of scholars such as Goody. But denying essentialism does not mean anything goes. I would like to suggest that violence be understood systemically.

By the eighteenth century, global domination and enlightenment came to be packaged in competitive organisms driven, as William McNeill has suggested, by "fiscal militarism" in Europe. Repackaged as capitalist national imperialisms by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the institutionalization of competition in the world system wrecked violence, exploitation, and ecological degradation on an unprecedented scale even as powerful forces of creativity and justice were simultaneously unleashed.

Sen also notes that there were landed routes that connected Asia and beyond. I chose to focus on maritime Asia precisely because, following Janet Abu-Lughod and others, this space seemed relatively free of military violence and control than the landed empires. Sen cites only two major episodes of maritime militarism (Chola and Zheng He) to keep the passages open over the last thousand years. Doubtless there were many more, but this maritime space does not seem to have been as militarized as that of later competitive organisms. The model of Asian connections I am suggesting with its weakly bounded, network-oriented, pluralistic, multitemporal, and issue-based compromises of sovereignty, harks back to this "assemblage" rather than to a competitive and congruent nation-state culture. The extent to which this network model can overcome the powerful nationalisms of modern Asian states is still to be seen. But I believe we can see its beginnings, the need and the urge for it.

The essays by Amitav Acharya and Barbara Andaya both contribute to this open-ended and pluralistic conception of Asia. They are entirely correct in pointing to the multiplicity of conceptions—or even regionalizations—of Asia, whether from a political, religious, or some other point of view. Their descriptions enable us to deepen our understanding of Asia as *representation.* In the first place, they represent the multiplicity of responses to a real process of

[1]Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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interconnection and interdependence that has no inherent goal. At the same time, they also speak to Gayatri Spivak's comment that "the possibility of the desire for a singular origin is in its iterability" (we want Asia because we can shape it repeatedly).

During the Cold War, Takeuchi Yoshimi articulated this problematic of Asia (as a *desired* signifier of resistance) with his enigmatic call of "Asia as method." More recently, Chen Kuan-hsing has sought to develop this "method" as a form of inter-referentiality where the experiences of neighbors with closely related or intertwined histories may be more suitable points of reference than those from more distant experiences that fill our textbooks and self-knowledge.[2] This superscribed mythic depository of "Asia" may well provide the symbolic underpinning for the emergent regional network. "Asia as method," however, should not be confused with the more substantive goal of achieving regional sustainability by the critique of rampant capitalism and unyielding nationalism.

Finally, let me briefly respond to Rudolf Mrázek's flamboyant and somewhat oblique critique of my methods. I certainly agree that entrenched institutions, exploitation, and national rivalries persist to a much greater degree than I have attended to here. I have expended much ink over those problems elsewhere. The idea here was to seize hold of an emergent reality and open a discussion about where it may be headed. All in all, I have been more satisfied with this forum than any other in which I have participated. My respondents have engaged with this emergent reality and provoked much critical debate about how we can think about it.

[2]Kuan-hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010).

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