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ASIA REDUX

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Asia Redux

Conceptualising a Region for Our Times

Edited by

Prasenjit Duara

With contributions by

**Sugata Bose, Jennifer Munger, Wang Hui,
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Barbara Watson Andaya, Rudolf Mrázek**



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES
Singapore



MANOHAR

First published in Singapore in 2013
by ISEAS Publishing
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Pasir Panjang
Singapore 119614
E-mail: publish@iseas.edu.sg
Website: <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>
for distribution in all countries except South Asia

Published by Manohar Publishers & Distributors
4753/23, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110002
for distribution in South Asia

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Originally published in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 69, Number 4
(November 2010)

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ISEAS Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Asia redux : conceptualising a region for our times / edited by Prasenjit Duara.

Regionalism—Asia.

Asia—Foreign relations.

Asia—History.

Duara, Prasenjit.

JZ5333 A831

2013

ISBN 978-981-4414-49-4 (hard cover)

ISBN 978-981-4414-51-7 (e-book, PDF)

Cover photo: Map of Asia, 1808. Source: *The General Gazetteer; or Compendious Geographical Dictionary* by R. Brookes. Eighth Edition. Dublin, 1808.

Typeset by Manohar Publishers.

Printed at Salasar Imaging Systems, Delhi 110035

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Preface

SUGATA BOSE

A world-historical transformation is under way in the early twenty-first century as Asia recovers the global position it had lost in the late eighteenth century. Yet the idea of Asia and a spirit of Asian universalism were alive and articulated in a variety of registers during the period of European imperial domination. One of the most creative exponents of an Asia-sense was Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. “Each country of Asia will solve its own historical problems according to its strength, nature and need,” Tagore said during a visit to Iran in 1932, “but the lamp that they will each carry on their path to progress will converge to illuminate the common ray of knowledge... it is only when the light of the spirit glows that the bond of humanity becomes true.”¹

In my book *A Hundred Horizons* I had claimed that Tagore was an eloquent proponent of a universalist aspiration, albeit a universalism with a difference.² This specific claim was part of a larger contention that modern history could be interpreted – not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially – as an interplay of multiple and competing universalisms. The colonized did not simply erect defensive walls around their notions of cultural difference. They were keen to be players in broad arenas of cosmopolitan thought zones and wished to contribute to the shaping of a global future.

The spirit of different universalism that appealed to anti-colonial nationalists in Asia may have been water-borne as it traveled through sea voyages across the Indian Ocean, but was never quite defined by an expanse of water except in a metaphorical sense. It is best in this context not to exaggerate the contradiction between oceans and continents that

¹ Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: the Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 265.

² Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, pp. 267-270.

has crept into some of the scholarly literature. The myth of continents has been subjected to a powerful indictment with some justice as a meta-geographical concept hopelessly tainted by the hubris of European imperialism.³ The idea of Asia, however, or of Africa, I might venture to add, was not a singular one and had almost as many variations as it had individual authors. More important, Asian universalism as articulated by Asians was certainly at variance with the concrete expression of Asia invented by nineteenth-century European geographers and cartographers. There were strands within Asian thought-worlds that merely inverted and did not undermine the Europe-Asia dichotomy, being content to invest the latter with a higher order of value and virtue. That forms a less interesting dimension of the modern tug-of-war between Europe and Asia. Far more fascinating was the imagination of Asia as an abstract entity transcending the imperial and national frontiers being etched by colonial powers on to the physical and mental maps of the colonized, and thereby serving as a prism to refract the light of universal humanity.

The exchange of views among scholars of Asia triggered by Prasenjit Duara's stimulating think piece "Asia Redux" contains a set of valuable insights into forms of spatial imagination in modern history. Duara's opening salvo has the merit of creatively integrating an analysis of economic networks with an exploration of a cultural ecumene. Dealing with the concepts of region and regionalization with great theoretical finesse, he is able to evoke the history of pre-modern and modern intra-Asian connections in the domain of material life and cultural conceptions of Asia forged in response to European imperialism within a common explanatory framework. Duara's essay is of great topical salience in our contemporary global moment.

Each of the responses opens up fresh avenues for reflection and research. Wang Hui perceptively notes how a re-conceptualization of Asia can never be divorced from a reconsideration of the idea of Europe and world history. Tansen Sen reminds us that land routes complemented sea-lanes in forging intra-Asian links in pre-modern times. This is equally true of the modern

³ Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

era. It is important to recognize that there were inter-regional arenas of human interactions transcending imperial and national boundaries over land and across seas. Sen also cautions us against over-romanticizing the nature of pre-modern connections by pointing to episodes of war and violent conflict. Yet these instances, as Duara notes, appear to be exceptions rather than the rule. The flows of culture and commerce proved resilient to the occasional violent ruptures. Moreover, the strategic essentializing in the modern era by poet-philosophers like Tagore, who emphasized intellectual and cultural interactions and downplayed military aggression in the past, is interesting of itself in expressing an ethical preference for the present and the future.

Amitava Acharya powerfully broaches the concept of regionalism as distinct from region and regionalization in thinking about Asia. The title of his response – “Asia is Not One” – appears to be a bit of a misnomer. What he really shows is that there were multiple articulations and alternative visions of the famous claim, first made by Okakura in 1901, that “Asia is one”. The distinctions and imbrications between the concepts of nationalist Asia, universalist Asia and regionalist Asia offer an innovative way forward in writing a new history of political and economic ideas that circulated across Asia and beyond.

If the forces of contemporary globalization have a dark under-belly, so do the flows that constitute an Asian or Indian Ocean inter-regional arena. Rudolf Mrázek underscores the need to train the spotlight on labor migration as well as the dialectic between mobility and immobility. Indentured migrant labor in mines and plantations was a key feature of Asia in the age of European colonial empires even as settled and sedentary peasant labor toiled on smallholdings. A post-imperialist and potentially post-nationalist Asia must do better.

Duara in his final word pleads guilty to the charge of indulging in advocacy. Taking a normative position after sifting through all the historical evidence does not necessarily undermine the standards of scholarly objectivity. In re-envisioning the idea of Asia in the Asian century it makes sense to take a stand on the side of a generous universalism against the hubris of an arrogant imperialism and narrow nationalism. The best Asian thinkers of the last two centuries did just that.

